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His Life and Work

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M.J. Toswell

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Acknowledgments



I want to thank the officers and sailors of the Rickmers Singapore, who from May to October 2010 dealt with a passenger with such kindness and humanity. I translated Jorge Luis Borges' *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* while we came through the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf under extremely high security, and finished it during the roughest section of the voyage, chased by a tornado and suffering very deep swells. Somehow, it seemed the most appropriate project. I completed the project early the following summer, and placed it in the care of Old English Publications (former the Old English Newsletter Subsidia Series), with Stephen Harris, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, as editor. But the project felt somewhat unfinished. I had wanted to leave Borges' words without extensive introductory material or detailed annotations as to what I considered to be his errors of fact or interpretation. On the other hand, the project made me dig out some old notes about Borges' Germanic medievalism, and although I turned my hand to other work, this one refused to move aside completely. In October 2013, I gave a paper at the International Society for Studies in Medievalism conference in Green Bay, Wisconsin organized by Edward Ridsen at St Norbert's College, and the kind reception of the paper there forced me to come back to Borges for another round. I am grateful to colleagues who supported and encouraged this Borges project, including my colleague in the Centre for Peripheral Studies at Western, Joel Faflak; Richard Moll, a fellow medievalist; and Marjorie Ratcliffe, the medieval Hispanist who has encouraged every step of my

Borgesians endeavors. David Murphy in the Weldon Library at Western tracked every interlibrary loan and my incessant borrowing of Borges tomes from the library, and offered good wishes at frequent intervals. I am grateful to them all. The errors of fact and interpretation in this book, however, are entirely my own.

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Introduction

Abstract: *The introduction uses a set of lectures Borges delivered in 1967–1968 at Harvard University, published in 2000 as *This Craft of Verse* in order to engage in a preliminary analysis of Borges’ medievalism, notably his references to Old English and Old Norse. The chapter uses other evidence from the 1960s, including the Spanish title of one collection *El Hacedor* and its English version *Dreamtigers*, in order to lay out the direction of the book.*

Keywords: Alberto Manguel; Borges; *Dreamtigers*; *El Hacedor*; Harvard lectures; kenning; medievalism; Old English; Old Norse; *This Craft of Verse*

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About 15 years ago, my colleague Călin Mihăilescu stopped by my office to ask if I would listen to some words on tapes that had recently been found in a library vault at Harvard University. The tapes recorded the voice of Jorge Luis Borges delivering the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard in the fall of 1967 and spring of 1968. In total Borges delivered six talks, published after their rediscovery as *This Craft of Verse*. His range of reference, as my colleague notes in his afterword to the lectures, is immense.¹ From the Greek classics to twentieth-century English novels, including the great texts of many languages, Borges knew the original texts, their later developments, their translations, and their reception in the modern day. Prominent among those texts, but less well-known and often unrecognized, were Old Norse sagas and Old English poems. My colleague was at my door because among those references were quotations in Old English of single words and of a few lines, translated by Borges but not otherwise identified. Călin's hope was that I might be able to recognize the passage in particular. As it turned out, any undergraduate student of Old English could have identified that passage: it was lines 31b–33a of *The Seafarer*, one of the most famous elegies from the Exeter Book, and it took me hardly five minutes to find Ida Gordon's edition and demonstrate the passage to my colleague's satisfaction.² There were some individual words as well, also pretty easy to decode. He went off, happy. And the transcribed lectures, with their afterword and explanation for the rediscovery of the tapes, went off to press and emerged as an elegant small paperback some time later. I, however, found myself remembering the years I spent studying literature in Spanish, both in Canada and in Spain. I found myself thinking about how thoroughly medieval Borges was as a writer, medieval in ways that I recognized as a scholar of Old English and Anglo-Saxon England. I started checking, and quite rapidly found that there was much to be discovered, rediscovered, and considered.

The Argentinian writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) was very many things during his life: a collaborator on detective stories and fantasies, a poet with ten separate collections published, an essayist and discussant on matters literary and political, joint author and editor of many works and anthologies, author of seven major collections of short stories, and a figure central not just to Spanish and Spanish-American literature but to world literature for his ability to express twentieth-century alienation and uncertainty. What has gone largely unnoticed about Borges, however, is that he was a medievalist, and his interest

in Germanic medievalism was pervasive throughout his life, and in his work. He wrote a study of Old English, Old Norse, and Old High German literature, offering detailed analyses of the major works in each language. The first edition of this book was with one collaborator, and a second edition 14 years later was with a second. Later yet he executed at least a dozen translations of Old English texts, seven of them with a third collaborator (all hispanic women and most former students of Borges himself). When he went blind around the age of fifty, according to his own repeated account in nearly every published interview thereafter, he returned to his study of Old English. Sometimes, according to these accounts, he also approached Old Norse, which he saw as much more difficult. This lens casts new light on Borges' repeated references in his texts to medieval ideas about authority, tradition, dreams, and particularly on his lifelong concern with ideas of heroism. This study considers Borges' life in terms of his knowledge of medieval studies, his writings and studies in the field of medieval studies, and the medieval elements in his creative work.

A specific example makes a good beginning to this analysis. Handily, *This Craft of Verse*, the Norton lectures at Harvard in 1967–1968 mentioned earlier, offers such a starting point, and one typical of the references to Germanic medievalism that Borges made relatively constantly from the mid-1960s to the end of his life. It seems best to start with Borges' explicit references to Old English, Old Norse, and Old High German texts, and only later to consider the less certain world of the influence this material might have had on his thinking, the more oblique references. *This Craft of Verse* is also appropriate for this introductory chapter as its six lectures were delivered from October 24, 1967 to April 10, 1968; they therefore fit neatly into the 1960s vibe of this opening chapter, a period during which Borges was also in his sixties. The first specific reference occurs early in the first lecture, itself entitled "The Riddle of Poetry":

Whenever I walk into a bookstore and find a book on one of my hobbies—for example, Old English or Old Norse poetry—I say to myself, "What a pity I can't buy that book, for I already have a copy at home."³

This opening lecture sweeps across many generations and literatures, in this passage commenting on the temptation to buy new books, and more generally commenting on the book as an artifact, and as a document filled with fascinating words. Moreover, Borges clearly states that he already has a very full collection of scholarly works in Germanic medieval

literature in his possession. A page later, Borges discusses the unusual Old English verb *tesan* and the noun *þreat*, which today are, respectively, “to tease, to joke” and “threat, warning” but in Old English meant “to wound with a sword” and “company, cohort, group of warriors.”⁴ In both cases, as Borges points out, the meanings have shifted. His concern is the beauty of words, and perhaps their longevity and mutability. The last example of the talk is an extended quotation from *The Seafarer*, read by Borges in what he calls the “stark and voweled Old English of the ninth century.”⁵ Warning the audience that if they return for future lectures they will hear much more Old English, he speaks of the poet writing this material in Northumberland, producing a poem which has in Borges’ view only been enriched by the passage of time. His conclusion is that once there is true knowledge of a subject, in this case poetry, it becomes difficult to define simply and easily, since the subject gains so many levels of complexity. *The Seafarer*, which for Borges is “so straightforward, so plain, and so pathetic through the centuries,” offers us a chance to enter into the thinking of its anonymous poet, and engage with a poem which speaks of “commonplace things.”⁶ Even in this opening chapter, Borges demonstrates detailed knowledge of Old English, quoting individual words and two-line passages, offering etymologies, and drawing conclusions about how we can come to know a subject, in this case poetry.

The second talk concerns the metaphor, and here Borges delights in quoting from Old English and Old Norse, beginning the talk with *þreat* from the opening lines of *Beowulf*, and ending his conspectus of kinds of metaphoric usage with a sequence of kennings from Old English and Old Norse. Thus the Norse kenning for blood, “the water of the serpent,” for Borges ties to the sword as “an essentially evil being, a being that lapped up the blood of men as if it were water.”⁷ He even discusses a Norse and Irish metaphor about battle as a “web of men” as an example of a metaphor which does not have the definite patterns that we find recognizable as metaphorical. He proposes that metaphors have major trends, but that it is also possible to invent new ones that do not reflect the patterns. In the third talk Borges moves on from his discussion of words, and then metaphors, to address the poet who writes narratives and tells tales. Here he makes brief references to the plots written by one of his favorite poets, Snorri Sturluson, to the Middle English poet Langland and his *Piers Plowman*, to the *Völsungassaga*, and to *Beowulf*.⁸ He even engages in medievalism, discussing a poem written by G.K. Chesterton about ninth-century Danish attacks on England and King

Alfred's victories. Borges is a fan of the epic, and very definitely not of the novel. His conclusion: "I believe that the poet shall once again be a maker,"⁹ thereby reflecting the title *El Hacedor* discussed later in this chapter. This lecture, like its predecessors, ranges broadly across several literatures, but this conclusion demonstrates that the most fundamental thoughts of Borges about poetry and the role of the poet reflected early medieval approaches.

The next lecture considers translation, and its first and longest example is the Old English poem now called *The Battle of Brunanburh*, which Borges calls the "Ode of Brunanburh," and its translation at the end of the nineteenth century by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.¹⁰ His reading of the text and its translation is close and careful, sensitive and precise. He also enters into the *mentalité* of the poet: "The whole poem is filled with a fierce, ruthless joy. He mocks those who have been defeated. He is very happy that they have been defeated."¹¹ Borges is onside with the poet, against the Danish invaders. He notes that he knew the Tennyson translation before the Old English original, which means that his access to the Middle Ages was mediated, as for most others in the twentieth century, through the romanticized and somewhat sentimentalized lens of the nineteenth century. Charminglly, he suggests near the end of the talk that on occasion he has invented a bold metaphor and ascribed it to a Persian or Norse poet in order to deflect criticism. Borges channels medieval poets, noting that they might well have invented his metaphor. In other words, he partakes of a profoundly medieval attitude to authority. Texts derive each from the other, and aspiring to originality is always a mistake—despite the popularity of the idea in the modern era.

The pattern by now is clear. Near the beginning and often near the end of each talk Borges invokes Old English or Old Norse. In "Thought and Poetry" he quotes Robert Louis Stevenson for the way the poet takes everyday words and makes magic of them, arguing that he will prove otherwise. His first exemplum for his argument is the Norse poets who could not, he argues, have expressed themselves as well in prose. King Alfred similarly wrote serviceable prose but "it rings no deep note," whereas the poetry that still lives begins with concrete references and remains a set of "words packed with magic."¹² For Borges, poetry returns a language to its sources, taking the magic of the words as they were originally developed, and restoring that magic to them. The last talk, "A Poet's Creed," draws conclusions about the role of words and poems that are well-nigh Jungian: "Words are symbols for shared memories... The

reader, if he is quick enough, can be satisfied with our merely hinting at something.”¹³ In this talk Borges makes his clearest and most cogent comments about his interest in Old Norse and Old English. As a young man he read Thomas Carlyle, who sent him to German literature, but he did not find what he was looking for. That, he states, is:

the idea I had—the idea of men not at all intellectual but given over to loyalty, to bravery, to a manly submission to fate—this I did not find, for example, in the *Nibelungenlied*. All of that seemed too romantic for me. I was to find it years and years afterwards in the Norse sagas and in the study of Old English poetry.¹⁴

He further describes the language as harsh but possessing a kind of beauty, and the poetry as possessing deep feeling. Old English had both metaphors and deep feeling. Borges draws the conclusion that this literature has to do with indomitable courage, submission to fate, beautiful and harsh language with metaphors that invoke deep feelings. These are broad and sweeping perceptions, but they were clearly heartfelt, and also deeply influential in the life and work of Borges himself.

The pattern of frequent reference to Old English and Old Norse which occurs here is one which is quite typical of Borges in his lectures and interviews from the 1960s onward. He knows Old English better, referring to it with more facility—and sometimes referring to quite obscure features of the extant texts. His Old Norse tends to involve slightly more general references, or discussions of specific kennings; Borges does not have the same easy mastery of this material. His references reflect his love of Old English and Old Norse, which several times he calls his “hobbies,” but also a more sophisticated understanding both of the connotation and denotation of words, and of the literature at a higher level. He can also hear it, comfortably commenting on its sounds and the psychological and emotional effects of those sounds. Most notably, he uses it profoundly for his thinking about literature and its role in society. Poetry for Borges was a public art, an epic art, and a complex, subtle art.

A second pointer to the pervasive influence of Old English and Old Norse on Borges is more tangible, and comes from the same time period. Alberto Manguel in a brief memoir recounts how as an older teenager he read to Borges in his flat three or four times a week for about four years from 1964 to 1968. At times he also transcribed poems recounted by the master, evoking the literary icons Homer and Milton in his service as amanuensis to the poet. Manguel in his description of Borges’ apartment

in Buenos Aires notes that along with volumes of poetry, the bookcases in Borges' bedroom held "one of the largest collections of Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literature in Latin America."¹⁵ Manguel notes with bemusement that Borges did not have any of his own works, but he did keep, hold, and use a large collection of Old English and Old Norse texts and reference works. Anglo-Saxon materials, and Borges' love of them, appear five more times in this short memoir, which offers both a clear-eyed assessment of Borges the person, as a writer who is already a monument of Argentinian literature, and as the blind man living with his aged and highly influential mother. The assessment is not a puff-piece flattering the master, but a judicious analysis offered by another writer and thinker. For example, Manguel discusses the relationship between Borges and his friend and collaborator Bioy Casares. He notes that Borges never considered Casares' wife, Silvina Campo, part of the rollicking dialogue he held with Bioy. There was one major point of contention between Casares and Borges, however; Bioy Casares loved France and French literature with the same passion that Borges had for England and the literature of the Anglo-Saxons.¹⁶ One linguistic difficulty does intervene here: in the Spanish language Old English literature is generally referred to as "la literatura anglo-sajona" but the whole of English literature can be called "la literatura inglesa" but also "la literatura anglo-sajona." Borges often used the latter locution both for the literature of the Anglo-Saxons before the year 1200, and also—perhaps puckishly and perhaps reflecting his belief in the essential continuity of English literature—more generally for all English literature. For Borges, as for few others, Old English poetry, the epic literature of the Anglo-Saxons and especially *Beowulf*, was in a direct line of development with modern British literature of the kind that Borges found most evocative. Manguel in his opening anecdote makes this clear: Borges asks "Bueno, ¿y si leemos a Kipling esta noche?" (Well, shall we read Kipling tonight?). Borges reached his own conclusions about what writers he loved and read. Manguel's short account certainly reveals that pride of place was accorded to Borges' Old English and Old Norse materials. He kept those books, and few others.

Chapter 2 of this study considers Borges' life and its evidence for his knowledge of medieval Germanic materials. His own account of his engagement with Old English in particular, which for him is often mentioned first, has some contradictions in it, and the evidence from biographies, his own accounts in a series of interviews in his last 20 years, and his own autobiographical account will be weighed against the

dates of publication of his works in the field. Borges' affinity for all things English is well known, evident in his own lifelong nickname of "Georgie" and his easy reference to a broad range of English poets, novelists, and essayists.

Chapter 3 turns to some of Borges' own work, specifically his poetry. His allusions here tend to be explicit, involving names from the poem *Beowulf*, discussions of swords and warfare, and evocations of heroic ideals and modes of being. Some previous scholarship does exist on this aspect of Borges' medievalism; the fullest analysis is that in the very fine article by Vladimir Brljak, which considers Borges' Germanic medievalism more generally but demonstrates its argument most clearly with the motif of that medievalism in the poetry that Borges produced throughout his life.¹⁷ One of his earliest works, first published in 1932 and republished by Borges at various points, was a consideration of Old Norse kennings (condensed metaphors which are a central feature of that poetic tradition). Mostly, the short monograph is a list of kennings, invoking that most medieval of constructions, the catalogue. Borges felt that his argument about the role of metaphor in poetry and in existence would be demonstrated by offering a large collection of metaphoric constructions, so that the reader could imbibe their centrality. That this mode of thinking, in condensed and highly allusive metaphors, imbued Borges' own poetry and prose is indubitable, and it was a lifelong engagement. Finally, the chapter considers another collaborative project, a set of translations of Old English poems and prose into Spanish he completed late in his life with María Kodama. Poetry is notoriously difficult to translate, and Borges' poetry is less known outside the Hispanic countries simply because of this hard fact; it is therefore particularly intriguing to investigate his own approach to translating the dense and allusive Anglo-Saxon poetry that he loved.

One of Borges' many collaborative scholarly works is a history of English literature, and another more specifically addresses medieval Germanic literatures. These works will be the focus of Chapter 4, which considers Borges' medievalism as a scholar and as an anthologist. He was a deeply intellectual man, learned and comfortable with his learning, lecturing on it for a dozen or more years at the University of Buenos Aires. His range of reference in works of literature and philosophy is extraordinary; his medievalism in his work as scholar and analyst can sometimes be conveyed with subtlety, and elsewhere with exuberance. Thus, with Margarita Guerrero he produced a medieval bestiary: *El libro*

de los seres imaginarios, a glorious compilation of “imaginary beings” in a book which both plays with and extends the Christian mythology of the bestiary, an allegorical and fantastical text which appealed deeply to the allegorical and fantastical Borges. He also found Dante a fascinating writer, producing essays concerning the dream visions of the fourteenth-century Italian poet, and most intriguingly comparing the *Divina Commedia* with some of its lesser-known antecedents: dream visions from seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England in the works of the Venerable Bede.

Borges is most recognized globally for his short fiction, his visionary, playful, meditative, ruminative, and highly imaginative short texts. Scholars discuss where to draw the line between his short stories and his essays, since they meld together and dance back and forth across the boundary—if such there be—between fiction and reality, between prose and the prosaic. Chapter 5 engages with these fascinating texts, selecting some exempla to demonstrate the medievalism hiding behind the Borgesian self. The central images of the labyrinth and the mirror, the central figure of the tiger: these do not automatically invoke the medieval, but this fundamental preoccupation of Borges is multivalent in its implications and omnipresent in his writing. To take one small example, his collection of essays *El Hacedor* is translated into English as *Dreamtigers* by colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin, after he spent five months as a visiting scholar there in late 1961 and early 1962.¹⁸ This title invokes the text’s exploration of dream and reality, the thin line between the real and the imagined, and it does so with a kenning, a *hapax legomenon* (a word occurring only once in the language) which in a delightfully Anglo-Saxon way invokes the spirit of this uncertainty as well as its written illumination. However, *El Hacedor* means, as the introduction by Miguel Enguídanos argues at some length, *The Maker*. Enguídanos argues that *hacedor* invokes the creator, the poet; presumably, he did not realize just how prescient his argument was, as Borges seems likely to have been invoking the Anglo-Saxon *scop*, the “shaper” or the “maker” who creates, mixes the words which result in a poem—as, of course, he says himself in interviews. Borges was playing with medievalism even in the title of this evocative mixed volume of short fiction, essays, parables, poems, and even what would today be called postcard stories or short-short stories. He probably found the translation amusing on several levels.

Chapter 6 draws conclusions about Borges’ medievalism, attempting to organize it into three periods in his life. The attempt is compromised

by his lifelong republication and reworking of his own material, so that poems he published as a young man were added in to later collections, and reworked into various versions of the *Obras completas* (Collected Works). Nonetheless, there are some points at which a shift in his medievalist concentration can be discerned and explicated, which may cast some light backward onto the argument of the rest of this monograph.

Borges was fluent in Spanish and English, and could write in either language. The next chapter indicates that, as a child he read in either language, and generally engaged with English texts in English, and Spanish texts in Spanish. My plan for quotation in this volume will be to use the English originals, where relevant, or English translations of Borges' materials most of the time, including citations from his original Spanish texts occasionally when the specific reference has added valence, or it otherwise seems appropriate. Given that my subject matter involves Germanic medievalism, including both Old English and Old Norse, this may cut the linguistic complexity of the material enough to make my argument more comprehensible. This would certainly disappoint Borges, whose facility in several languages and whose delight in playing and punning cross-linguistically is well known. However, it may help with making the main line of the argument here a bit clearer.

That argument, the opening thesis here, is that Borges' medievalism was a curious mixture of near-scholarly dispassionate analysis with a child-like enthusiasm and passion which generally involves a surprisingly simplistic and literal interpretation of the text. He admires, wholeheartedly, the bravery of Beowulf without ever addressing the deeper complexities of the decisions taken by the eponymous hero of the poem.¹⁹ For Borges, *Beowulf* is an epic poem, a statement of indomitable and unswerving heroic patience and stoicism in the face of overwhelming and insurmountable opposition. This is a simple and charming interpretation, and one that reflects the faith and hope of a young man. On the other hand, the medieval bestiary offers the older intellectual a model of fantastic allegory which can be redirected into modern political, social, and intellectual constructions of a postmodern, even what is today called a posthuman, world. These short depictions, both thoughtful and playful, perhaps encapsulate the medievalism of Jorge Luis Borges for some. For others, Borges' medievalism well reflects the maddening opacity and uncertain semiotics of his most famous and enduring works: by times apparently straightforward and simple, or dense and indecipherable.

Notes

- 1 See "Of This and That Versatile Craft," pp. 143–50 in Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse*. Ed. Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- 2 Ida Gordon, ed. *The Seafarer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979) p. 37.
- 3 "The Riddle of Poetry," in *This Craft of Verse*, p. 9.
- 4 "The Riddle of Poetry," pp. 10–11.
- 5 "The Riddle of Poetry," pp. 16–17. This is the quotation I identified for my colleague. I do have to note that Borges often referred to Old English in these terms, and while the "stark" seems reasonable to me, I've never been convinced that he was right about the language as principally "voweled." While the vowels of Old English are a complicated and varied lot, the poetry depends on consonants, on alliteration for its structure and its meter, and it seems to me that the poetry is more consonantly based than vocalic.
- 6 "The Riddle of Poetry," p. 17 for both quotations.
- 7 "The Metaphor," in *This Craft of Verse*, p. 37. The discussion of *preat* is pp. 22–23.
- 8 "The Telling of the Tale," in *This Craft of Verse*, pp. 43–55, *passim*.
- 9 "The Telling of the Tale," p. 55.
- 10 "Word-Music and Translation," pp. 57–76, with discussion of *The Battle of Brunanburh* at pp. 58–59 and 62–64.
- 11 "Word-Music and Translation," p. 63.
- 12 "Thought and Poetry," pp. 77–95, at pp. 79–80.
- 13 "A Poet's Creed," pp. 97–121, at p. 117.
- 14 "A Poet's Creed," p. 105.
- 15 Alberto Manguel, *With Borges* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004) pp. 27–28.
- 16 Manguel, *With Borges*, pp. 69–70. The relationship among Bioy Casares, Silvina Campo, and Borges is discussed in pp. 61–76. The memoir is also published in Spanish, translated out of English: Alberto Manguel, *Con Borges*. Tr. Eduardo Bertí (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2004).
- 17 See Vladimir Brljak, "Borges and the North," *Studies in Medievalism* XX (2011) pp. 99–128.
- 18 Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers*. Trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland. Introduction Miguel Enguídanos (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), especially the introduction at pp. 12–16.
- 19 Many times, when asked what poems he loved most, his first answer was the epic poem, *Beowulf*. Second would be the elegies, led by *The Seafarer*. See, for example, the extended set of interviews he did with María Esther Vázquez, *Borges, sus días y su tiempo* (Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara Editor, 1984), where chapter 11 concerns "La literatura inglesa" (English literature), pp. 169–197; this material is p. 170.

2

The Germanic Medievalism of Borges' Life

Abstract: *The chapter begins with consideration of Borges' death and burial in the Pleinpalais Cemetery in Geneva, with a tombstone inscribed in Old English and Old Norse, and images relevant to those languages. It then moves in a roughly chronological manner through Borges' life (1899–1986), from his youth in Argentina, teenage years in Geneva, a year in Spain, young adulthood back in Buenos Aires through the first round of very active publication, to the more established years in which he traveled extensively. His second round of extremely active publication came in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and he continued to give lectures and interviews, and to publish new and collaborative works until just before his death. His medievalism was a lifelong endeavor, weaving its way throughout his career and his work.*

Keywords: Argentina; Battle of Maldon; Borges autobiography; Borges biography; Old English; Old Norse; Pleinpalais Cemetery; Völsungassaga; Willis Barnstone

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In December 1981 I visited the Pleinpalais Cemetery (locally it is the Cimetière des Rois) in Geneva, Switzerland. There was a light dusting of snow on the ground and it was a dull day. I was in the Christmas break of a year abroad studying in Valencia, Spain, and I was using a Eurail Pass to wander the continent in a highly disorganized and idiosyncratic way. My home base, Valencia, was a torrid and exciting place at the time, filled with discos and bars, the focus of an outburst of rule-breaking and fun after the long and quiet Franco years. It was also the place where military tanks had rumbled onto the streets during the abortive coup attempt scotched by the king, and for the preceding three months I had walked past heavily armed teenagers in soldiers' uniforms on every street-corner of the town during the day, and probably the same guys dressed to party in the evening. The contrast was striking and truly Hispanic, and over Christmas I needed a break from the weirdness of that life. Earlier that day in staid, even dour, Geneva, I had discovered a classic introductory textbook on Old English, Quirk and Wrenn's *Introduction* in a used-book store in the center of the old city, and bought it on the spot since the previous year I had fallen in love with Old English in an undergraduate course in McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. But that winter I was thinking about Hispanic thinkers, and about what had happened to them in the migrations about Europe. The Spanish Civil War had driven many out and killed others, most famously the poet García Lorca. The Franco years had been repressive and stultifying, and Spain rather seemed in 1981 to be emerging from a coma. By contract, Geneva was somnolent and clean and crisp. And, as I looked at the Pleinpalais, I thought about how this city was where Jorge Luis Borges, one of my favorite authors, had spent his high-school years. It was a city to which he had returned many times. I had of course no idea that, five years hence, in this cemetery which in my memory appends itself to a peaceful square walkable from the city center of Geneva, Borges would lie. But I visited the grave of John Calvin, noticed a couple of others with familiar names, and generally wandered about enjoying the broad pathways and the trees. It's a very civilized cemetery, organized—even regimented—and tidy.

Borges chose to end his life far from where it began, in Buenos Aires in Argentina. Some months before his death he chose to travel with his assistant María Kodama first to Italy for a holiday, and then to Geneva to die. He had been diagnosed with liver cancer, and had very firmly and without regrets decided to die in Geneva, in Switzerland, in a city he had known since his teenage years. Geneva, he said, was *una de mis patrias*,

“one of my homelands.” He had visited there frequently, and he knew the city, its cantons, its passion for order, its cosmopolitanism as a UN headquarters, and its insularity as a small Swiss city on the southwestern tip of Lake Geneva. There he could die in comfort, and there he could remain. A couple of months before his death he married María Kodama, which means that today she remains the guardian of his legacy, his literary executor and the person who knew him best in his last 20 years. Her decision for his grave was a spot in the Pleinpalais, relatively close to Calvin (if on purpose perhaps as an oblique reference to his high school in Geneva, the Collège Calvin).

Borges’ gravestone has on each side phrases and images taken from Germanic medieval texts. The image on the face of the stone is a group of seven warriors standing one behind the other in thigh-length tunics, most of them brandishing swords over their heads. The tunics are secured at the waist, and the men are bare-legged. They closely resemble the foot-soldiers of the Bayeux Tapestry. Behind them the sculptor has hinted at further cohorts of warriors, but basically the scene is a spare and simple one of purposeful and heroic action. These men are going to war. Above them, in Old English, appear words taken from the *Battle of Maldon*, an Old English poem: *and ne forhtodon na*. This is line 20 of the poem, part of the opening setup in which the English troops prepare to engage with an army of invading Vikings in 991 in Essex. One of them sends his hawk to the woods to demonstrate his willingness to engage, and the leader of the troop, Byrhtnoth the earl of Essex, organizes and advises the rest on how to stand and hold their weapons and shields. The poet bluntly, if inaccurately, states *and ne forhtodon na* (and they were not at all afraid). The battle begins and while the very early stages go well, Byrhtnoth makes what many Anglo-Saxonists consider to be a tactical error which allows the Vikings too far onto the battlefield. He is a focus of their attack, and they succeed in killing him, at the cost of several of their warriors. Many of the Anglo-Saxon warriors break and flee, leaving a small cohort to fight and die in defense of their lord, choosing not to outlive him on the battlefield. At the end of the text as it survives, the old retainer Byrhtwold delivers a very famous speech: *Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte sceal þe cenre, mod þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað* (Our spirit must be the sterner, our heart the braver, our soul the greater as our power diminishes).¹ This quotation is the more famous one from the *Battle of Maldon*, and there is little doubt that Borges knew it, and knew its statement of indomitable bravery, its insistence that remaining on the

battlefield to die offers its own righteous reward. And yet Borges, or Kodama channeling Borges, chose this earlier statement, an optimistic insistence on the emotional strength of character of the warriors. Of course, the poem commemorated a battle which was reported in other Anglo-Saxon sources as a resounding defeat, so this statement is at the same time proud, firm, and deeply ironic. Its quotation on Borges' tomb is an exercise in Borgesian interpretation: possibly a genuine statement about the importance of facing one's life, and death, with bravery, possibly an ironic warning that bravery cannot be enough, and possibly—since the statement of bravery is phrased in the negative as “they were not in the least fearful”—a rhetorical play invoking both fear and a lack of fear, thereby keeping all possibilities in mind.

The obverse of the tombstone offers a more straightforward sequence from Old Norse, one that is a quotation of an extremely well-known line from *Völsungassaga*: *Hann tekr sverthit Gram/ok leggir i methal theira bert* (He takes the sword Gram and lays it naked between them). Here Sigurd, with the opportunity to sleep with his beloved, Brynhild, chooses to behave honorably. The decision to sleep separated by a sword resonates elsewhere in medieval literature, notably in the stories of Tristan and Isolde, and Lancelot and Guinevere. It reflects the behavior of true lovers, sleeping in the same bed but not sleeping with each other—another Borgesian conundrum. This Old Norse version may be the earliest engagement with this trope, and perhaps the purest: Sigurd has won Brynhild, his own lost love, for his wife's brother by subterfuge, and he holds to his sense of honor. Below the inscription is an incised image of a Viking longboat in full sail, with the characteristic square sail and high prow and stern. Below the image is a second carved epigraph: “De Ulrica a Javier Otárola” (From Ulrica to Javier Otárola). Given that this side of the tombstone refers to great lovers, it seems likely that this inscription is a personal message from María Kodama de Borges to her dead husband. The names are personal petnames reflecting the only love story that Borges ever wrote, in *El libro de arena* (The Book of Sand), published in 1975. In the story “Ulrica,” Borges writes a fantastic tale set in the north of England in which two people from very different backgrounds meet, and the story constructs their relationship as like that of Sigurd and Brynhild, arriving at an exalted resolution in the last sentence.

The reference to a Norse saga, while certainly a personal exchange between husband and new wife, also reflects Borges' childhood reading material. By his own account, he had relatively free access to his father's

library, and this was the focus of his childhood and teenage years. Also by his own account, he read freely, in English and Spanish, adventure stories and tales and novels.² Borges' father, a lawyer who was more interested in the life of the mind and concentrated on philosophy, psychology, and Eastern thinking, had a large and eclectic library. His grandmother on his father's side was Fanny Haslam, who lived with the family. She had come to Argentina from the north of England as a young woman, and met and married a military man, a colonel who patrolled the frontiers of the country, and died in complicated and unhappy circumstances in battle. His grandson read Argentinian *gaucho* tales alongside Mark Twain and H.G. Wells; Borges read Miguel de Cervantes' masterpiece, *Don Quijote*, in English in an edition owned by his father. As he says in his autobiography, when he later read the vast and sprawling heroic, romantic, and philosophical epic novel that is *Don Quijote* in Spanish, it seemed to him a poor translation from the English. In other words, young "Georgie," as he was called inside the family, functioned very comfortably in English and in Spanish. His mother, who lived with him until her death in 1975 at the age of 99, came from an old Argentinian family which had not been particularly intellectual.³ She, however, learned from her husband and read copiously in English, even publishing translations into Spanish of, among others, Virginia Woolf, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and William Saroyan. Borges notes wryly that he is given the credit for this work, which is hers. When Borges went blind around the age of 50, his mother became his companion, traveling with him and serving as his eyes for reading and for organizing his life. She was active and engaged, and a happy member of the home. His father had gone blind when Borges was a teenager, and died in 1938, aged 64.⁴

Borges and his younger sister, Norah, started school late at his father's insistence, as he did not trust the government or the school system in Argentina at the time. They lived in the poor suburb of Palermo (his mother's ancestors had rebelled on various occasions against the Argentinian dynasties and lost all their lands), but were a highly intellectual family. The school Borges attended starting at the age of 9 was English, but very insular and focused on Argentine history. During this period, by his own account, the most important feature of his life was the garden of the family home in Palermo and his father's library, which was "a library of endless English books."⁵ His early reading included the *Arabian Nights*, the fairy tales discovered in many volumes by Andrew Lang, the early works of H.G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, G.K. Chesterton,

and especially Robert Louis Stevenson. In 1914 the entire family moved to Geneva, where Borges spent his high-school years in a French school. During these years he worked hard on his Latin, as at the Collège Calvin in Geneva that was a priority, but also turned to German and German literature, gained a reading knowledge of Italian so that he could read Dante in the original, discovered Walt Whitman (first in a German translation), and continued to write and compose. The family decided to go back to Argentina by way of Spain (not the most usual route in those days for educated Argentinians, since the country had left Spain behind at the beginning of the nineteenth century), spending a year there. During that time Borges wrote some left-wing, even Communist, works and some early meditative pieces which he destroyed before leaving Spain or upon arrival in Argentina. He became an Ultraist poet, and brought that mode back with him to Buenos Aires in 1921. Intriguingly, in the autobiographical material he has left about this period, he never once refers to the First World War, which must at the very least have inconvenienced him during this time. What he does discuss is the way his family by this point takes it for granted that he will be a writer. His life plan is set before the return to Argentina, at just past the age of 20.

Since the focus here is medievalism, it may be worth pausing to think about what texts Borges would have known at this point in his life. He clearly states that he had worked through Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and he had also read many Old Norse sagas in the translations by William Morris; his father had given him Morris' version of the *Volsung Saga* (as he calls it).⁶ He might have read Morris' translation of *Beowulf*, though he does not refer to it. He had English, Spanish, French, and German at his command, but his own reports of his early reading speak mostly of the great nineteenth-century writers in those languages, not their medieval forebears. He did not like Shakespeare, and he does not mention many authors, in any language, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries—though he does refer to philosophers such as Berkeley and Hume. But his great love as a child was Grimm's *Fairy Tales* and Burton's *Arabian Nights*—these texts are medievalist, materials written in the nineteenth century (or stories recounted in the nineteenth century) which offer a vision from a distance of the Middle Ages. To this point, Borges' medievalism was mediated, directed through a nineteenth-century lens.

The next ten years, in Argentina, marked the beginning of Borges' serious literary career. He was central to the Buenos Aires literary scene, serving for several magazines as founder, editor, and writer. He published

three books of poetry, the book *El idioma de los argentinos* (The Language of the Argentinian People), several prose works of various kinds, and a biography of a family friend and poet, Evaristo Carriego. On the latter there was some concern from his mother, who did not understand why he would write about a *guapo*, a tough, who was nothing but a bum. She felt, according to Borges' later account, that Carriego's interest in a cult of courage had corrupted her son.⁷ Borges remained deeply impressed by this notion of the hero, of the "cult of courage," as he put it, throughout his life. It lay beneath much of his work on Argentina, and it may explain, in part—perhaps a large part—his particular brand of medievalism, which focuses on individual heroes and their behavior. The history of Argentina in the twentieth century was turbulent, and it gravely affected Borges' life at every point. The famous example is of course his "promotion" from librarian to chicken inspector at the beginning of the Peronista regime, at the same time that his mother and sister were arrested for protesting against the government. When the Peronists were gone, Borges was nearly blind but his political and intellectual allies insisted on his new job as director of the Biblioteca Nacional (the National Library), and later on his appointment as professor of literature in the university. His grandparents had lost land, money, and influence for supporting the losing sides in previous political conflicts, and the fortunes of Borges himself also rose and fell according to current political winners and losers. Thus, throughout his life Borges was fascinated by the rougher elements in Argentinian society, by the criminals and the losers, by the *gauchos* and the emotional and passionate world they inhabited. He loved the tango and the hero, the *milonga* (another close-hold dance) and the *truco* (a card game involving deceit and trickery). He read Argentinian westerns, and wrote some himself. And in his second great flood of publications, *El informe de Brodie* (Brodie's Report) in 1970 returned to the Argentinian *gaucho* and stories of the pampas, with brutal knife fights, violent duels, ethical quandaries which are resolved by men deciding on what their honor requires, and a deeply laconic terseness of presentation. Moreover, Borges worked on the line between literature and reality, interviewing a local tough for his side of his story and sympathizing with him, writing about his own ancestors and their battles, and generally writing prose that offered a verisimilitude so deep-seated that scholars still argue over where to locate some of his pieces on the continuum from fiction to memoir or biographical narrative. In short, his own encounters with Argentina and the brutal world

of its frontiers reflect the Old Norse sagas and to some extent *Beowulf* and other Old English poems. His choice of which tales to tell, the terseness of the presentation, the spare elegance of the brutal encounters he describes: these are all features of the sagas and poems he loved.

From the point of view of Borges' medievalism, one of the signal works of his life came early in the next decade when *Las Kenningar* was published in 1932. It was republished as part of *La historia de la eternidad* in 1936, and before publication as a booklet it had appeared in the journal *Sur* under the title *Los kenningar*. Perhaps to establish a firmer context for this study of Old Norse kennings, in *Breve Historia de la Eternidad* (A Brief History of Eternity), Borges added a companion piece, an analysis of the metaphor arguing that metaphors are a finite group, reducible to "eternal theme or tired cliché."⁸ Often later in life he argued that metaphors are a highly ordered set of mental connections, not nearly as original or startling as the ordinary reader or listener might consider them to be. In this early analysis, he started in this direction, using a highly sophisticated and structured group—and one that must have been entirely unknown by his audience—for his sample. His principal biographer, Emir Rodríguez Monegal, explains this sequence and comments:

In the corrected version the essay is basically a compilation of and a commentary on those very elaborate rhetorical figures and their code. Quoting extensively from the Eddas, Borges relates that long-forgotten poetry to the efforts made in the baroque age by Spanish poets such as Quevedo, Góngora, and Gracián, and to the experiments of the ultraists.⁹

Rodríguez Monegal further notes that in the 1936 version the essay is dedicated to Norah Lange, one of many women who interested Borges during his life. The author refers to her Norwegian ancestry as something that would allow her to engage with these metaphors.¹⁰ Although Borges' infatuation with Lange appears to have been unsuccessful, his deep interest in Old Norse poetical structures was a lifelong endeavor.

Having started to publish a mixture of poetry, short essays, and short stories in the 1920s in Buenos Aires, Borges accelerated this production through the next two decades, establishing a body of work that earned him international as well as national acclaim. His most well-known and major collections of short stories came out during this period: *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* in 1941, a collection whose title in English is less cumbersome: *The Garden of Forking Paths*; *Ficciones* (Fictions) in 1944, *El*

Aleph (The Aleph and Other Stories) in 1949; and *El Hacedor* (as previously discussed, *Dreamtigers* in the English translation, but more properly *The Maker*) in 1960. These collections made his reputation as a postmodernist before postmodernism, a magic realist before magic realism, even a posthumanist before posthumanism. The dense and allusive stories in these collections offered a tremendous ideological and philosophical density of construction, tricky turns and clever perceptual turns in service of complex themes and ideas, and meditative ruminations on issues of time and reality. During these years Borges also established some of the collaborations that remained central to his literary and philosophical life: with his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares and his partner Silvina Ocampo he edited an anthology of fantastic literature (*Antología de la literatura fantástica*) in 1940, and he also collaborated in collections of Argentinian literature and poetry. In fact, as will be discussed later, Borges seems to have worked best when he had several projects of various kinds in preparation. He published poetry collections at intervals through this period, each one including the best works (or the ones he chose separately at this point) from previous collections as well as new work. Borges was, it has to be said, a champion recycler. With Delia Ingenieros he published an analysis of medieval Germanic literature in 1951 entitled *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* which included many of the kennings he had published in 1933 in his booklet about these condensed metaphors; moreover, in 1965 in collaboration with María Esther Vásquez he published a light revision of the 1951 volume, now entitled *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (Medieval Germanic Literatures). Addressing Old English poetry and some prose, Old Norse sagas and some poetry, and Old High German texts, with a brief discussion of Gothic, the volume offers summaries of these long-distant texts and also assessments, sometimes scholarly but more often quite personal, of the quality of these materials. At the same time, with Bioy Casares he was writing a series of detective stories under the name H. Bustos Domecq, a project which was demonstrating their mutual delight in setting problems for their detective to resolve and also their delight in playing with and subverting the genre—and, more generally, the idea that truth can be determined in any meaningful way. The two had great fun with their project, one of the delights of Borges' life at this period.

Despite Borges' growing reputation, he did not receive the accolades that might have been expected in Argentina. He was often overlooked, to the point of insult. He certainly had a complex relationship with his

fellow *porteños*, inhabitants of Buenos Aires, and even in the essays he wrote celebrating Argentinian culture and mores he tended to draw comparisons that moved into European and especially English literatures which may well have given offence. His political stances at various points also disadvantaged him, especially during the Peronist regime of the late 1940s. And his frequent references to medieval Germanic literature, generally ignored by his audience, must have contributed to this effect. His production, for example, with Margarita Guerrero of a *Manual de zoología fantástica* (Manual of Fantastic Zoology) in 1957, and a follow-up based very obviously on a medieval bestiary, *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (The Book of Imaginary Beings) in 1967 was certainly playful and intriguing, but its allegorical elements and its deeply European ground bass could well have been off-putting as part of the writer's accomplishments. In any case, although his followers and friends acquired for him the directorship of the National Library and the professorship at the University of Buenos Aires in 1955 and 1956, respectively, Borges in the 1960s embraced every opportunity to travel. He lectured in several countries in Europe, in the United States—often taking writer-in-residence gigs and accepting prizes that were not on offer back home—and even in Israel. He began and continued a practice of global engagement which continued to the end of his days; the middle years in which he had remained more or less based in Buenos Aires were put behind him.

These were also the years in which Borges came to terms with his blindness, something which had developed gradually in his late 30s and 40s, with the process of going blind finished at about the age of 51, a few years before he obtained the National Library post. It was at this point, according to his very many interviews (a practice he began in the 1960s and continued through to the 1980s), that he went back to learning Old English. There are many statements about how he did this, and most of them contradict the fact that he must have already known enough Old English to write his detailed analysis, *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, in the late 1940s for publication in 1951 with Delia Ingenieros. Although he frequently states that he learned Old English after going blind, he must have known its basic elements beforehand. Nonetheless, in his mind this was a seminal turning point in his life. For example:

When I could see a little, I used to open a book and know instinctively that what I had read was, let us say, at the bottom of one of the odd pages, and its general whereabouts in the book. Now I have to manage differently. I've got quite a good memory and I began learning Old English in 1955,

when I could no longer read. Since then I've held a seminar in Old English for a small group of students. Once I got them to draw on the blackboard in the National Library the two runic letters representing the sound *th* in Anglo-Saxon. I know hundreds of lines of Anglo-Saxon verse by heart, but I couldn't clearly imagine the page they were written on. The students drew them very large, in chalk, and now I have some idea what those unseen pages look like."¹¹

Borges offers comments like this in many interviews. The salient points associate his interest in Old English with his blindness and offer the study of Old English as a matter of community with a select group of students. His last amanuensis, companion, and, two months before his death, wife was a part of this group according to several of these interviews. Certainly María Kodama was closely involved in the Old English projects he worked on near the end of his life.

In one conversation, with Willis Barnstone, Borges changes the approach slightly, discussing the Old English bestiary poems, the etymology of modern English "bonfire" (from *Æ banfyr*, bone-fire), and then indicating that he learned Old English with the help of a priest in Buenos Aires. He notes further, "The grammar's hard, you know. This Jesuit had a very deep knowledge of it. Then I went on to Old Norse and Icelandic, but I have to struggle with them. I put things in order when I wrote a small volume on Old Germanic literatures."¹² As Vladimir Brljak carefully notes, the chronology here cannot be right. Borges had already published the *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* volume in 1951, before he was blind (or, at least, wholly blind), and the references he makes to taking up Old English in 1955, or in 1958, leading to publishing of *Literaturas germánicas medievales* in 1965, ignore the existence of the earlier book (which is extremely like the later one, despite what the collaborator of the later one argues).¹³ Moreover, the 1951 volume was completed with the collaboration of Delia Ingenieros, the daughter of the well-known thinker José Ingenieros, someone who does not otherwise appear significantly in Borges' life. The 1965 volume was in collaboration with María Esther Vásquez, who was part of the informal classes in Old English in Buenos Aires, and worked with Borges both on this project and on a historical study of all of English literature. Vásquez more closely fits the pattern of the young women that Borges worshipped and enjoyed, and employed as collaborators or secretaries (especially after his mother stopped doing the job in the early 1970s before her death in 1975).

Few of Borges' biographers and commentators discuss the writer's concern with Old English. One exception is James Woodall, who located one of the young students who joined the group learning Old English and later Old Norse. Vlady Kociancich points out that Borges was not giving seminars, but learning with the students, who were guessing at the pronunciation. Borges himself was locking the material into his memory. Woodall also considers when María Kodama joined the group, remaining a quiet presence for some years. There was some upheaval during this time for Borges. His mother was in her eighties and could not be counted on to continue organizing his life in the background while in the foreground he collaborated with and worshipped a series of young, beautiful, and intelligent women. He married one of these, though nearly forty years after they first met and twenty years after he wrote her love letters; Borges' wife from 1967 to 1970, when he fled from the marriage, was Elsa Astete Millán. His mother, initially unhappy, reconciled to the marriage although Astete Millán had no English and could not partake of Borges' intellectual life in that language (he was, with Thomas di Giovanni, translating many of his works into English in the late 1960s); however, when he left his wife, his mother briefly had her Georgie back. María Kodama stepped in, as secretary and reader, and gradually over the ensuing years as a closer confidante and, eventually, wife.

Woodall notes two other events in this period which demonstrate Borges' sincere commitment to Old English. First, when he was offered an honorary degree at the University of Oxford in 1971, Borges demanded that during the festivities he would meet with Richard Hamer. Hamer at the time was a relatively junior fellow at Christ Church, Oxford. He was not the professor of Old English, who was Alistair Campbell at the time. But, he had published with Faber a facing-page translation of a group of the most famous and interesting Old English poems, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*.¹⁴ Borges cornered him at the reception after his degree and asked him a series of questions about Old English which clearly demonstrated a sincere desire to learn more about it. Hamer also answered a written series of questions in the following days.¹⁵ During that trip Borges had also been taken to Iceland for a visit by di Giovanni; they were later joined by Kodama. Second, Borges in this period was frequently in London and investigating his family roots in England. In 1963 he had toured Scotland and Yorkshire, where his grandmother had been raised, and he had gone to the Saxon Church at Deerhurst in the western Cotswolds, where he had recited the Lord's Prayer in Old

English. These are, obviously, the acts of a serious student of the language and literature of early England.

The one interlocutor who was favorably disposed to discuss Old English with Borges was Willis Barnstone (on one occasion, at least), a theorist of translation studies himself, and a poet. In a poignant memoir after Borges' death, Barnstone describes, in a chapter entitled "The Old English Lesson," classes held in Borges' dining room in 1975 and lasting about two hours. Barnstone lists the students, and notes that "The atmosphere is electric."¹⁶ There are some problems with Barnstone's presentation, since he suggests that Borges had been a professor of Anglo-Saxon language and literature at the University of Buenos Aires, when he clearly was not. He also describes the decision about which text to discuss as being a choice between "Old English or Old Norse, or (on some more adventurous occasions) from Old Icelandic." Since Old Norse and Old Icelandic are the same thing, Barnstone is a little confused. He seems a little like Borges' mother, who was confused as to why he would become enamored of this material of barbaric northerners instead of Greek. But Borges thrilled to Old English. He delighted in the barbarian, the outlaw, as Barnstone puts it. The students work through various texts in Old English, using Borges' reference books to decode words or ideas they do not readily understand, and then read some Old Norse, the work of Snorri Sturluson. They finish the evening with Borges' preferred reading habit, nineteenth-century American writers: Whitman first in importance, then Emerson, Dickinson, Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, or James. On those evenings, more than at any other time, Borges laughed and enjoyed himself.

In the last several decades of his life, Borges traveled a great deal. Initially terrified at the thought of speaking to large groups when he was obliged in 1944 to refuse his "promotion" to chicken inspector from the post of junior librarian, Borges learned once he started lecturing and speaking to audiences that he had a remarkable ability to reach large groups of people. Barnstone describes him as standing alone at a reception in his honor, but smiling, happy because he knew that soon he would have the opportunity to meet and connect with others.¹⁷ He received many honors, including the Prix Formentor jointly with Samuel Beckett in 1961, the Miguel Cervantes prize in 1979–1980, honorary degrees from several American universities—but not ever the National Prize of Argentina, which rankled, nor the Nobel Prize, which he may have made impossible with an ill-advised visit to Chile for various honors

during the regime of Augusto Pinochet.¹⁸ Although he did change his mind about the dictator, the damage was done. Borges had to settle in his last years for universal acclaim, and for the personal satisfaction of continuing to write and to publish his writings, and his collected works, in several rounds with corrections and alterations, additions and subtractions, in each. In a truly Borgesian way, he has left scholars with a richly complex legacy of materials. Even piecing together only the work on Old English and Old Norse, the material that is clearly early and Germanic, is difficult. Understanding and comprehending the twists and turns of all his work would be significantly more difficult.

In another Borgesian turn, controversy continues with respect to his estate. The Argentinian government attempted to annul his marriage, which because he had previously been married was accomplished in a relatively complicated way through an out-of-the-way registry office in Paraguay; the marriage could not be annulled, however, because a record of it could not be found. Moreover, although Borges clearly wanted to die abroad, once he became aware that he had cancer of the liver and chose explicitly to move to Geneva for his last months, efforts are still sporadically made to disinter him and repatriate the body to Argentina. The master of the obscure and the tricky would have been intrigued. His double, the Borges who believed in plain speaking and true statement of courage, would not. The latter Borges was, in the dreams of the writer at least, the one who engaged most fully with Old English and Old Norse, beginning very early in his life.

Notes

- 1 Peter S. Baker, *Introduction to Old English*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 221–234, quotation from p. 233, lines 312–313.
- 2 For the details of Borges' life, I will depend most heavily on his own accounts, notably "An Autobiographical Essay," with Norman Thomas di Giovanni, published in *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969*. ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with Jorge Luis Borges (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1970), pp. 201–260. In the Preface to the volume Borges explains that the translations are the work both of author and translator, and states that "The autobiographical essay and commentaries, prepared especially for this volume, were written directly in English" (p. 10). Unsurprisingly, the autobiography is also available in Spanish, published after his death: Jorge Luis Borges con Norman Thomas di Giovanni,

Autobiografía 1899–1970 (Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 1999); this version has some lovely images of Borges' manuscripts.

- 3 See James Woodall, *The Man in the Mirror of the Book: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), p. 249.
- 4 Borges' ancestors and first 30 years are very well chronicled in *George 1899–1930: Una vida de Jorge Luis Borges*, Alejandro Vaccaro (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa/Alberto Casares, 1996). The family trees are particularly useful, as is the extended chronology, which for each year provides information about Borges' own life and works, a section indicating other literary and artistic events and publications in South America and Spain, and extended details about Argentinian politics. Despite the fact that for seven of these years Borges and his family were in Europe, the focus on Argentina seems absolutely correct.
- 5 See Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges on Borges," in *In Memory of Borges*. Ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London: Constable with the Anglo-Argentine Society, 1988), pp. 39–51. The quotation is p. 39, and the list of Borges' early reading continues from pp. 39–41, and includes his statement, in English, that "I have done most of my reading in English" (p. 40). He further notes that when he thinks of the Bible, he is speaking of the King James Bible, and in English.
- 6 See *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*. Ed. Willis Barnstone (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 3.
- 7 Borges recounts this interchange in *Twenty-Four Conversations with Borges, Including a Selection of Poems*. Interviews by Roberto Alifano 1981–1983 (Housatonic, MA: Lascaux Publishers, 1984), p. 5 in an interview entitled "Some Personal Memories."
- 8 See "On Metaphor" in Jorge Luis Borges, *On Writing* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2010), pp. 42–45 at p. 44.
- 9 Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), pp. 267–268.
- 10 A detailed analysis of the personal relationships of Borges, notably his complicated relationships with a series of women but also including his friendships with men, is Maria Esther Vásquez, *Borges: Esplendor y Derrota* (Borges: Splendor and Collapse) (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 1996). She connects each individual woman, with the pet names and images that Borges associated with her, to the works Borges did—sometimes with the woman and sometimes inspired by her.
- 11 "Jorge Luis Borges," Rita Guibert, 1968. Rep. in *Jorge Luis Borges. Conversations*. ed. Richard Burgin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), pp. 42–75. Quotation is pp. 44–45.
- 12 "With Borges in Buenos Aires," Willis Barnstone. 1975. Rep. in *Jorge Luis Borges. Conversations*. pp. 138–148, p. 139. See also *Borges at Eighty*:

- Conversations*. Ed. Willis Barnstone. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). Borges discusses Old English at length starting on p. 3, and noting that it is "Very fine poetry. Not a sentimental line in it. A speech for warriors, for priests, for sailors also" (p. 3).
- 13 See Vladimir Brljak, "Borges and the North," *Studies in Medievalism* XX (2011), pp. 99–128, especially p. 107.
 - 14 Richard Hamer, ed. and trans., *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970); the book has remained in print, with the most recent edition in 2006.
 - 15 See James Woodall, *The Man in the Mirror of the Book: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), p. 236.
 - 16 See Willis Barnstone, *With Borges on an Ordinary Evening in Buenos Aires: A Memoir* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993), in which "The Old English Lesson" is pp. 38–53. The quotation is p. 49.
 - 17 Barnstone, *With Borges*, p. 1.
 - 18 See Steven Boldy, *A Companion to Jorge Luis Borges* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Tamesis, Boydell & Brewer, 2009), pp. 42–43.

3

Borges the Poet

Abstract: *Borges was first a poet, and his medievalism does seem imbricated with his poetry. Many of his poems make casual references to Old English and Old Norse medieval texts, as analyzed in the opening of the chapter. Other poems are explicitly about medieval matters, including those about an Anglo-Saxon ruler and about learning Old English. Moreover, Borges' lifelong interest in kennings, a kind of condensed metaphor, reflects in the density and elegance of his metaphors and locutions in his poetry. And, in his last decade Borges returned to translating Old English texts into Spanish, including, with María Kodama as coauthor, an intriguing rendition of the twelfth-century Anglo-Saxon poem known as "The Grave."*

Keywords: *Beowulf*; Borges' poetry; imagery; kenning; María Kodama; "The Grave"

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Borges was first a poet. Metaphors were at the core of his thinking and writing. As he says himself: "I believe that poetry is something so intimate, so essential, that it cannot be defined without oversimplifying it." Poetry is always an aesthetic act, and it is one shared among the poet and the reader, something "magical, mysterious, unexplainable—although not incomprehensible."¹ His first several books were poetry chapbooks; Borges did not seriously begin to write prose until a severe and unusual accident in 1938 when a pane of glass cut his scalp severely, resulting in severe inflammation and poisoning, and a considerable amount of time unconscious and on the point of death. Before this accident, Borges principally was a poet; after it, he developed the prose writer full of ambiguities and philosophical reversals and uncertainties now known as Borges. However, when he went blind in his early fifties, Borges returned to poetry. As Rodríguez Monegal points out in 1978:

Blindness also brought Borges back to poetry. In the last decade especially, poems seem to flow naturally from him. The old guru is a traditional poet who wisely sticks to the sonnet because it is easy to compose in the mind, who preserves rhyme because it keeps ringing, and who celebrates his discoveries (new places and new readings of old books and authors) but keeps coming back to a handful of trusted subjects: old age, blindness, emptiness (metaphysical and personal), and longing for a reality that has always eluded him.²

Among the trusted subjects for Borges throughout his life was heroism, and particularly the construction of the hero. Very frequently, his exemplary heroes were figures from Old English and Old Norse. This chapter examines some of Borges' verse involving Germanic themes and subjects, considers his deep interest in the metaphor as reflected in his lifelong engagement with kennings, and finally considers his work with María Kodama translating Old English poetry into modern Spanish verse. Although he frequently collaborated, more often with women than with men, in the production of various scholarly works, collaboration in the production of poetry was a new development and one that took place in the last few years of his life.³

Also a feature of the last years of his life was a concern with the past. Graham Greene, in the opening paragraph of his own reminiscence of Borges, notes that "Robert Louis Stevenson did write one good poem. A poem about his ancestors."⁴ Borges, he says, recited the entire poem to him, perfectly, on a crowded street in Buenos Aires, and then, after lunch he "quoted large chunks of Anglo-Saxon."⁵ Greene notes that he

could not follow this material, but he was struck both by how Borges' eyes were focused and engaged and by how he had a tremendous feeling for his ancestors. Borges, it has to be said, tied his own personal history to an Anglo-Saxon past. His grandmother's name, Fanny Haslam, was Anglo-Saxon in origin, connected to a place-name from the village "Hazelham" (home of hazel trees) or simply to a location, a place where someone lived by hazel trees, probably in Yorkshire or Northumbria. Forms of the surname without "h" appear farther south, as Aslam and its variant forms. Borges in a famous poem, which he titled in English as "The Thing I Am," explores his antecedents and the poetic and spiritual connections they suggested to him.⁶ In only 11 lines he lists his grandfather, the Borges who died in battle in La Verde, then his mother, Leonor Acevedo, also descended from warriors and herself a fierce personality. His father, albeit a Borges, is a more peaceable soul, the one from whom Borges inherited his love of literature and perhaps a kind of passive acceptance of death (his father died relatively young). The next ancestor is his father's mother, a Haslam of the Northumbrian and Mercian Haslams, and Borges speaks of this ancestor as *descifrando los versículos/ De la Escritura, lejos de Northumberland* (deciphering the biblical verses from the Scripture, far from Northumberland). He is evidently thinking of the famous seventh-century monks of Northumbria reading their scriptures. Bede, one of Borges' favorite medieval thinkers, was one of these, at Wearmouth-Jarrow. The reference to being far from Northumberland reflects his grandmother's move to Argentina, where she met his grandfather, a Suárez who was also a soldier and warrior, described as *de la carga de las lanzas* (with a burden of spears). Borges plays through a paradox, opening the poem with the line *He olvidado mi nombre* (I have forgotten my name), and then citing the four named ancestors who, as far as he is concerned, provide him with his blood and fiber, his approach to the world. After Borges, Acevedo, Haslam, and Suárez, he is himself a lesser being, *apenas la sombra* (at best the shadow), someone intimately imbricated with their accomplishments, but separate and Other. The first part of Borges' analysis is profoundly reminiscent of the onomastic self-analysis of a contemporary never mentioned by Borges, W.H. Auden. Auden was also descended from a northern English family, one whose etymology he defined as associated with Odin, the Norse god of poetry and leader of the gods and warriors in Valhalla. Auden's connections to his Norse ancestry were

tremendously important to him; he traveled to Iceland and trekked through the paths of the Norse sagas, and spoke feelingly of his love of Anglo-Saxon.⁷ Borges, by contrast, went to Iceland once at the behest of Thomas di Giovanni, and did not stray far from Reykjavik, although he was extremely happy there.⁸ And though the Norse sagas were tremendously important to him, he was perhaps more self-aware than Auden from the outset, as he recognized his own shortcomings, his own failure to behave as he thought his ancestors did. Although he was but a quarter English, his South American ancestry seems wholly to have involved warriors, and his concern with explicating the concerns and ideologies of fighters, the role of weapons, the atmosphere of a duel or a battle: this concern must have had to do, at a deep level, with Borges' sense of his family tree. His conclusion in the poem is *Soy su memoria, pero soy el otro* (I am their memory, but I am something else/the Other). He is their inheritor, their descendant, and also something different, something other.

Borges makes this point with an interesting locution: "It may be no more than a romantic superstition of mine, but the fact that the Haslams lived in Northumbria and Mercia—or, as they are today called Northumberland and the Midlands—links me with a Saxon and perhaps a Danish past."⁹ Borges further notes that his penchant for his own northern past has resulted in some of his own countrymen, Argentinians, calling him an Englishman. He objects to this slur as well. But the more intriguing term here is his deprecating "It may be no more than a romantic superstition." Although Haslam is certainly an Anglo-Saxon name, Borges' linkage certainly is a romantic superstition. In fact, it reflects a kind of nineteenth-century romanticized kinship to our Anglo-Saxon forebears that is a very particular kind of medievalism.

Borges' poetry on medieval themes

Borges wrote poems that were explicitly on Old Norse and Old English themes throughout his life. Joseph Tyler surveys about a dozen of them, commenting on their style and themes, and on the ways in which the poems coincide with the arguments that the poet made in his scholarly works in the field.¹⁰ For example, Tyler points out Borges' interest in the idea that toenails and fingernails continue to grow after death, an idea

which to some extent overlaps with the Norse mythological idea of a ship made from the fingernails of the dead appearing at Ragnarok. Tyler's thesis, which is very plausible, is that for Borges this Germanic material offered him a chance at a *Doppelgänger*, a double who could serve as his other self and allow him to dramatize the conflicted nature of his self: Argentine and English, politically and personally split. Vladimir Brljak also provides in footnotes an extended list of Borges' medievalist poems, in furtherance of his argument that "It is in verse, however, that Borges's northernist muse found its medium of expression."¹¹ Borges was also an inveterate reviser of his poems, not unlike Yeats or Auden among British poets, and a really detailed study of his medieval references in poetry would probably cast up a great deal more information about how his views shifted (and, generally speaking, returned to his original position after a brief episode of hawing). Perhaps it would be best to start with a few of the poems that are not obviously or explicitly on medieval themes, in order to see just how pervasive these references are in Borges' poetry. Thus, for example, "El Oro de los Tigres" (The Gold of the Tigers) focuses on the animal Borges thought of as his personal totem, the animal that had fascinated him since he was a child. The poem describes the tiger in captivity but not knowing it, and shifts to other tigers including that of Blake, and, to other gold references including one to Zeus, and then refers to *El anillo que cada nueve noches/ Engendra nueve anillos y éstos, nueve,/Y no hay un fin* (the gold ring which, on every ninth night, gives light to nine rings more, and these, nine more, and there is never an end).¹² The reference, as Borges indicated in his original note, is to Draupnir, the great gold ring of the Norse gods. More specifically, reference to Draupnir or to Draupnir's ring in Old Norse is a direct reference to gold, to the treasure that humans strive to obtain during their short and heroic lives. Its most famous appearance in Old Norse—as Borges certainly knew since late in his life he effected a translation of this text—is in *Gylfaginning* (The Tricking of Gylfi), when Odin places it on the funeral pyre of his beloved son, the god Baldr who was himself tricked and killed. Mention of Draupnir evokes this sad history, and perhaps also evokes a sense that a religion that chases money is doomed. There is never an end to the gold, but there is an end to human flesh, which may explain why the poem finishes on an unexpected passionate note: *Oh un oro más precioso, tu cabello/Que ansían estas manos* (O gold more dear to me, gold of your hair/which these hands long to touch). Like the tiger which Borges explicitly rejects

at the end of the poem, Draupnir is a dangerous myth; it is better to leave myths behind in favor of ordinary human interaction. The ending could be interpreted as bathetic, but perhaps it is more Borgesian simply to see it as human.

A second example of a poem not explicitly medieval in its focus, from the same volume, is *Alguien* (Someone), in which the third-person man through whom the poem is focalized (Borges himself) can hope to be thankful for *una no sospechada etimología/un verso latino o sajón* (an unsuspected etymology, a Latin or Saxon verse).¹³ Borges probably means here “an unexpected etymology,” for him a kind of pure philological pleasure, and the “Latin or Saxon verse” refers of course to a Latin or Old English verse. He rarely cited Latin verses, though as a young man he had achieved some facility in that language, but he certainly cited Anglo-Saxon materials. Later in the same poem he sets up the opposition that for him is a part of his medievalist aesthetic: *un hombre que ha sido desleal/y con el que fueron desleales* “a man who has betrayed/and has been betrayed.” Being a traitor, and being with someone against whom others had been traitors calls to mind the “Lord’s Prayer” in Old English, a text that Borges recited in the Anglo-Saxon church at Deerhurst. In that text those who sin, or commit a sin, producing *gyltas*, are juxtaposed against the *gyltendum*, the ones who have sinned against them. The Old English uses the polyptoton of *gyltas/gyltendum* to suggest that sinning and sinners tread very close together. For Borges, betraying and being betrayed had the same close connection: being *desleal* and having others be *desleales* was part and parcel of the life he expected. The awkwardness of the Spanish syntax here (*con el que fueron desleales* might seem more sensible in the plural *con los que fueron desleales* so that rather than “with the one against whom they were disloyal” could be “and with those who were disloyal”) suggests that Borges wanted to establish uncertainty and ambiguity as to where the betrayal or betrayals happened.¹⁴

Even very casual mentions demonstrate Borges’ knowledge of matters medieval. In an uncollected poem simply entitled “1985,” and perhaps one of his last works, Borges begins with *No en el clamor de una famosa fecha,/roja en el calendario* (Not in the clamor of a famous date,/ red on the calendar). By describing at the outset where memorable things are not found, he opens the door for delineating where indelible and secret memories are to be found. The opening, however, casually reveals that Borges knows where red-letter days on the calendar come

from; they result from major feasts of the Christian church, which were written in red in medieval calendars, so that the international and important feasts would stand out from the local and less important ones written in black or brown ink. Those rubricated feast-days create a clamor on the page, but that noise is not, for Borges, what is genuinely important and to be remembered. What is important is *algo que lleva y que no pierde el viento* (something which the wind takes and does not lose).¹⁵

Borges' poems addressing Old English topics, which are more frequent than those picking up Old Norse ideas, have their largest concentration in the volume *El Otro, El Mismo* (perhaps best translated as *The Other/The Self*), published first in 1964, but not, apparently, as a separate volume. In some ways, this may explain why Borges was confused about when he learned Old English, since he remembered learning it after he was blind. That period in his life was the time that he happily returned to poetry, and also the time in which he produced the poems focusing on Old English. Thus, for example, "Hengist Cyning" is a title itself already in Old English: Hengist the King.¹⁶ The poem is in two parts, the first a four-line epitaph of the king, lauding him as the first king from the line of Odin. He clearly died in battle as he *sació el hambre de las águilas* (sated the hunger of the eagles); the reference to the beasts of battle topos is clear, and brutally certain. The second part of the poem, written in a kind of free verse not typical of Borges at this time as he had turned to more formal and structured forms, is a dramatic monologue spoken by the king. He tells the story of his life, beginning as a mercenary hired by the British and destroying their enemies, but then betraying them to seize his own kingdom. In the last lines he deals with the issue of whether he is a traitor or not, aware that *los britanos*, the British take him as a *traidor*, traitor. However, *he sido fiel a mi valentía* (I have been true to my courage). Hengist also describes himself in the last two lines of the poem as someone who has seized his destiny in his own hands. He has not entrusted his destiny to others, nor has he permitted or caused any man to attempt to betray him. In other words, he has been courageous and powerful, true to himself and so strong in his own beliefs that others have accepted him as he is. Borges, framing the poem in the first person, seems a bit wistful here. He would like to be able to say the same as the long-dead Hengist, first of the Saxon mercenaries to stay in England and carve out his own kingdom.

A sonnet written at the same time offers a second example of just how thoroughly Borges constructed his sense of self through his interest in Old English. Entitled *Composición escrita en un ejemplar de la gesta de Beowulf* (Composition written in a copy of the epic poem *Beowulf*), the poem in its 14 lines questions why, in the first person, Borges was moved to study Old English when suffering from blindness (he describes it as the moment when “my night advances”). The poet’s memory is spent, losing its grip on words, rather the way in which *mi vida/teje y desteje su cansada historia* (my life weaves and unweaves its weary history). And then the sonnet turns, in a classic Shakespearean sonnet twist for the last six lines, to offer the uplifting message of hope and possibility that, for Borges, is the message encapsulated by learning Old English. The verb is in the future tense, *será* (it will be, it shall be), and it invokes Borges’ belief that the soul knows its own immortality and can encompass all. As Borges concludes, beyond *este verso/me aguarda inagotable el universo* (the universe waits, beyond this verse, inexhaustible). That final adjective *inagotable* implies a full vessel that cannot be poured out, cannot be emptied, cannot be exhausted. For Borges, Old English leads inexorably to this inexhaustible conception of the universe, so that loss of vision, loss of memory, loss of enjoyment in life as it repeats itself: these are all unimportant compared to the joyous possibilities of the soul’s immortality, its all-encompassing and enfolding circle to offer the student of Old English every joy and delight.¹⁷ Borges connects his blindness to his speaking of Old English, a blunt tongue which should perhaps not delight him as much as it does. His memory he describes as failing, his life as repetitious and cyclical. Nonetheless, there is hope, and he can access the possibilities of the universe. Old English seems, paradoxically since it is largely a dead language, to offer him access to that universe.

These few examples of Borges’ medievalism as revealed in his poetry demonstrate that Borges really showed his true self in his lyric works. Where he could hide himself, or happily contradict himself, in his essays and short fiction, in his poetry Borges spoke truly. As Martin Stabb points out, in a book written in the late 1960s, “Poetry, it must be remembered, has always been an essential activity for Borges. Even during the years of little poetic activity, he felt the genre’s primacy in his scale of literary values.”¹⁸ Perhaps because Borges is so internationally recognized for his prose, scholars have insufficiently investigated the poems both for his true themes and for his medievalism.

Borges on Kennings

Kennings, condensed metaphors, are well-nigh impossible in Spanish, which is not a language that lends itself easily to compounding nouns. It may well have been the sheer exoticism of kennings that first attracted Borges. In any case, he was already fascinated by kennings as a young man in his twenties, publishing an article about them in one of the many journals he was involved in—in this case, *Sur*, and then a booklet called *Las Kenningar* in 1932, which was reprinted along with an additional essay on the metaphor in *Historia de la eternidad* (History of Eternity) in 1935. In the 1953 reprint of *Historia de la eternidad* Borges advises the rare reader interested in kennings to look at his 1951 volume *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (Ancient Germanic Literatures) done in collaboration with Delia Ingenieros. More, in the 1962 *posdata*, postdated information, Borges offers a bibliography of the most useful texts for this study, and notes that alliterations and metaphors are the fundamental base of Old English literature. In his “Autobiographical Essay,” Borges introduces the issue thus:

I had always been attracted to the metaphor, and this leaning led me to the study of the simple Saxon kennings and overelaborate Norse ones. As far back as 1932, I had even written an essay about them. The quaint notion of using, as far as it could be done, metaphors instead of straightforward nouns, and of these metaphors’ being at once traditional and arbitrary, puzzled and appealed to me. I was later to surmise that the purpose of the figures lay not only in the pleasure given by the pomp and circumstance of compounding words but also in the demands of alliteration. Taken by themselves, the kennings are not especially witty, and calling a ship “a sea-stallion” and the open sea “the whale’s road” is no great feat. The Norse skalds went a step further, calling the sea “the sea-stallion’s-road,” so that what originally was an image became a laborious equation.¹⁹

These thoughts are presumably Borges’ conclusions in the 1960s, even at the turn to 1970, since if he seriously considered the kenning nothing but a “laborious equation” it is hard to fathom why he would publish on this stylistic feature several times over his life. In part, he was certainly just enjoying the fun of philology, which was clearly a lifelong obsession. He had encyclopedias, and he enjoyed thinking about etymologies and changes in meaning over the generations. He even had an early copy of Samuel Johnson’s dictionary of English, the first fully articulated dictionary of that language. In part, however, kennings must have appealed to the young Borges for more than just the pleasure of thinking about words.

And yet, Borges refers to kennings as *penas* (painful, miserable), and states that they were developed around the year 1000 when skalds took over Old Norse texts to make this difficult and barbarous poetry.²⁰ The turning point comes when he compares kennings to the extreme imagery of Spanish Baroque poetry; here, quite suddenly, he argues: *Reducir cada kenning a una palabra no es despejar incógnitas: es anular el poema* (Reducing each “kenning” to a single word is not shedding light on the unknown: it is obliterating the poem).²¹ Comparing the kennings to Gracián, Borges suddenly finds that they illuminate, whereas the Spanish Baroque excesses just confuse. He seems, in fact, to be employing the rhetorical technique of clearing out possible criticisms first, framing up the negative, then doubling down on how much more unimpressive the excessive imagery of the baroque is. Borges then turns to Snorri Sturluson, and his suite of examples in the *Poetic Edda*, giving many of them in Spanish. Borges points out that the kenning reflects the central accomplishment of early Germanic literatures: the compound word. He offers detailed examples and thematic connections in *Beowulf*, in the Old English bestiary poems, and even gives examples of kennings from the saints’ lives, which were not the easiest materials in Old English to locate at this time. Moreover, once he has completed his consideration of the medieval kenning, he finds its descendants in later English literature, specifically in Chapman’s translation of Homer, in Yeats, and in Burton’s translation of the *Book of the 1001 Nights*. The article has two postscripts, one undated but clearly from the original writing as published in 1932, which brings in William Morris’ translation of the *Völsungassaga*, the Koran, and a dedication to Norah Lange, the woman he adored at that time. The dedication suggests that her blood, which was Norwegian in part, should resonate with and recognize this material. The second postscript, dated 1962, offers a somewhat more careful assessment of Old English verse in particular (though Borges frames it as referring to all Germanic verse), noting that although alliteration and metaphor are at the core of Old English verse, alliteration is more a means than an end. On the metaphor he is less certain, suggesting that kennings are not automatically metaphorical; he cites the opening lines of *Beowulf*, concluding that metaphors might also not be a requirement of the verse. The conclusion is unexpected, and he wavers back and forth on it in later writings.

To summarize Borges’ analysis of kennings in this piece written very early in his long career is difficult. He was already fully aware of Old Norse poetic techniques and approaches, and of all the Old Norse sagas,

since he quotes from several in the article. He had strong views already about the ideals of heroism in *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*, and was already very cognizant of the bestiary poems that he was to use as inspiration a generation later. In other words, although he spent his life asking questions about Old English and pursuing its study, already in this very early study he knew more and thought more than the vast preponderance of English writers about early Germanic materials. Already he knew about the riches available in Old English, and the greater riches in Old Norse. A few months before his death, in an interview concerning medieval Germanic verse, Borges stated: *La literatura empezó con la poesía y por eso he estudiado las metáforas de la poesía de Islandia y, en general, de la anglosajona, porque permiten la formación de voces compuestas* (This literature began with poetry, and because of this I have studied the metaphors of Icelandic verse and, in general, of the Anglo-Saxon, because they allow for the formation of compound voices, compound structures).²² The wavering back and forth on how central the kenning might be is gone: once again Borges reiterates the views he held in 1933 when *Las Kenningar* was first published.²³ Those were the views that underlay his later thinking and imbued his own ideas about the role of the metaphor in poetry. It allowed for compound structures, for double voices. And that, for Borges, was central.

The collaborative poet

Despite his extraordinary and astonishing short stories, his imagistic, ironic, ineffable, and highly individual poetry, Borges was a great collaborator. He collaborated a lot. His *Obras completas* (Collected Works) as published by Emecé—which, in a hugely Borgesian turn, are neither complete nor definitive—includes a fourth volume, by far the largest, published in 1979 and including his collaborations. That is, the first three volumes (reworked into a single volume in 1974) have his seven relatively brief short story collections, his eight volumes of poetry, and his many other writings. The fourth volume includes only some of his many collaborations, but runs to nearly a thousand pages. For example, Borges worked with his boyhood friend, Adolfo Bioy Casares, on translations of E.E. Cummings and Henri Michaux, and with Bioy Casares and his partner Silvina Ocampo on an anthology of fantastic literature. Together Borges and Bioy Casares even created a joint author H. Bustos Domecq.

Bustos Domecq wrote stories and novels in five volumes published between 1942 and 1977, stretching across much of Borges' working life. These are baroque tales, mysteries with extravagant characters, embedded in *gauchismo* and the contradictory worlds of mid-century Argentina, mostly satirical but with an underlying love of the country and its denizens. Strikingly, no one discusses these remarkable pieces.

My concern here is his last collaborator, a woman he hired as his secretary in 1975 who had been a student in his Old English classes in the late 1960s in Buenos Aires. María Kodama was his faithful amanuensis and companion for the last 11 years of his life, even becoming his wife in April 1986 two months before his death in Geneva. With her he published in 1978 a *Breve Antología Anglosajona* "Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology," reprinted almost immediately thereafter in the *Obras completas* in 1979. The project clearly proves that Borges' concern with Old English was a lifelong endeavor. It seems only fair, therefore, to consider the extent to which Borges' medievalism inflected his understanding of literature and especially of narrative. The prologue describes this collection as a "pregusto," an *amuse-bouche*, a bare tidbit which may recall to mind in the prose of Castile the "viejas espadas" or ancient swords of the Anglo-Saxons. To evoke those ancient swords, Borges and Kodama begin with the story of Scyld Scefing's funeral from *Beowulf*, commenting in their notes that the author was probably an Anglo-Saxon monk at the turn of the eighth century who conceived the strange notion of composing an *Aeneid* for his nation. Scyld chose at the end of his life to return to the ocean from which he came at the beginning, which demonstrates that England shares with Portugal and some other northern nations a deep-seated nostalgia of the sea. There follows a somewhat looser interpretation of the *Finnsburh Fragment*, the whole of *Deor*, and the first section of *The Seafarer* with reference to Ezra Pound's translation as producing less the sense and more the sound of the original. The last three texts are rather unusual choices: "The Grave," described by Borges and Kodama as an adaptation of Ecclesiastes chapter 12; the story of Othhere from the translation of Orosius ordered by Alfred; and a piece of what they call an eleventh-century dialogue, which is the prose *Solomon and Saturn*. In the notes for two of these texts, the authors refer to Longfellow's use of these texts, which may suggest the source for some of their translational choices. In the textbooks or anthologies available at the time (and before, since Borges appears to have been working on Old English since the early 1950s), I cannot find this set of texts, though combining almost any

two anthologies easily encompasses them. It is difficult to determine the purpose of this brief anthology. The authors date their preface to July 9, 1978, so it was published separately for months, if that, before inclusion in the *Obras completas* (Complete Works) in 1979. Kodama was at the time the last in a series of young secretaries, in some ways last in a series of young women with whom Borges became besotted. In April 1986, two months before Borges' death from cancer of the liver, they were married, by proxy almost, in Paraguay although they were in Geneva. After Borges' death, when the government of Argentina attempted to annul the marriage in order to gain control of the body and the estate of their greatest literary figure, it could not be done because no evidence that it had been concluded could be found. In any case, at this point it is clear that Kodama was another in the line of young women with whom Borges collaborated on his endeavors in medieval Germanic literature. Interestingly, the Old English pieces are all translated into prose, except "The Grave," which we will look at shortly. First, however, let us consider Scyld's funeral from *Beowulf*:

En la hora de su destino, Scyld, fuerte aún, buscó el amparo de su Señor. Fieles a la orden que les había dado el pastor de los Scyldings, cuando aún era capaz de palabra, sus amados compañeros lo condujeron a la orilla del mar. En el puerto aguardaba la curva nave, la embarcación del príncipe, nevada y con deseo de partir. En su regazo tendieron al querido rey, al distribuidor de sortijas: el afamado junto al mástil. Había tesoros y ornamentos traídos de muy lejos. No hay fama de otra nave tan airosa exornada de armas de muerte, de vestiduras de guerra, de espadas y corazas. Muchos eran los tesoros que irían muy lejos con él, sobre su pecho, bajo el poder del mar. No lo abastecieron con menos esplendor, con menos riqueza, que las que en el principio lo rodearon cuando era un niño. Alto sobre su cabeza, flameaba, entretejido de oro, un estandarte. Dejaron que lo llevara y lo arrastrara el mar, el Guerrero Armado de Lanza. Tristes plañían. Nadie puede afirmar con certidumbre, ni los consejeros en las asambleas, ni los héroes bajo los cielos, quién recibió esa carga.

[Scyld, at the proper time, though still strong, sought the light of his Lord. His beloved companions, loyal to the orders the shepherd of the Scyldings had given them when he was capable of speaking, carried him to the ocean shore. An elegant ship in the port, snowy-white and eager to depart, waited for the arrival of the prince. They placed the beloved king, the ring-giver, in its lap: the famous one by the mast. There were treasures and ornaments brought from very far away. No account exists of another ship so graceful, adorned with the weapons of death, with war-corslets, with swords and breast-plates.

Many were the treasures which came from far with him, on his chest, (now) in the sea's power. They did not supply him with less splendour, with less riches, than did those who at the beginning surrounded him (with treasures) when he was a child. His standard was flying high over his head, interwoven with gold. They allowed the sea to carry and to take him away, the warrior armed with his lance. The sorrowful ones mourned. Nobody can say with certainty, neither the counsellors in their assemblies nor the heroes under the skies, who received that cargo.]

The Borges/Kodama text is a careful translation of lines 26–52 of *Beowulf*. It takes apart the compounds to reshape them into adjectives and nouns, for the most part, but it largely retains the Germanic syntax, so that in Spanish the feel of the piece is somewhat archaic, certainly stately. Most of the epithets remain, especially for Scyld. The ship is not quite so fully treated, and the repetition of laying Scyld in the bosom of the ship and then laying treasures on Scyld's own bosom (*bearm*) is not retained, perhaps wisely. The tricky *isig*, an adjective describing the ship which is *hapax legomenon* (a unique occurrence in the language) and usually rendered in English as “icy” but with long notes or queries, is given as *nevada*, so that the ship is “snowy” or “snowy-white.” The same otherworldly tinge emerges as in the Old English, a slight turn to the fantastic which is lost by the translation “icy,” which just seems rather confusing. If the ship is ice-bound, how can it sail? If it's shining with ice, won't the ice weigh down the mast and make it hard to sail? Or is the *isig*, as Borges and Kodama perhaps take it, a hint toward the cold otherworld. The golden standard over Scyld's head is here “*entretejido*” with gold, or “interwoven,” clearly marking the standard as made of fabric and not metal. This is a thoughtful rendition, and one that moves a bit beyond the original. There is a lot of emphasis throughout on heroes and their accoutrements, on the war-gear and the warriors who ponder the direction in which Scyld is heading; this reflects a lifelong concern for Borges, but is also fairly typical of translations of the poem. The alternation between the individual, Scyld himself, and toward the end of the passage an individual who mourns in Old English standing in for the whole population: this alternation is gone from the translation. The warriors stand together, carry Scyld as a beloved leader and last burden, provide him with what he needs for an afterlife, and mourn together. The same elision occurs in Seamus Heaney's translation, for example, as he could not comfortably manage the shift from singular to plural and back either.²⁴ This is a solid and careful translation.

Where Borges and Kodama tread away from the solid and the careful is in their highly biblical and rhetorical version of “The Grave,” *La Sepultura*. Here are the first seven lines:

Para ti fue hecha la casa, antes que nacieras.
 Para ti fue destinada la tierra antes que salieras de tu madre.
 No la hicieron aún. Su hondura se ignora.
 No la hicieron aún que largo tendrá.
 Ahora yo te llevo a tu sitio.
 Ahora te mido a ti primero y a la tierra después.
 Tu casa no es muy alta. Es humilde y baja.
 [The house was made for you, before you were born.
 The land was destined for you before you emerged from your mother.
 Nevertheless, they did not make it. Nor do they know its profundity.
 They did not make it although it will last for a long time.
 Now I will take you to your place.
 Now I will measure you first against yourself and later against the
 land.
 Your house is not very tall. It is humble and low.]

The translation by Drew Jones, from 2012, reads somewhat differently:

A house was built for you before you were born. Earth was your appointed end before you emerged from your mother. But it was not prepared, nor its depth measured, nor has yet been considered what length it should be for you. Now you are brought to the place where you must be. Now someone must measure you and then the earth. Your house will not be loftily constructed; it will be low-slung and level when you lie in it.²⁵

This is a fascinating choice and an equally fascinating translation. The text itself appears to belong in the family of late Old English soul and body texts, but it does not have the spiritual analysis or the theological approach of the three other surviving texts in this mode. This one appears to have a series of simple gnomic statements; they could be riddling, or they could be intended to be straightforward. Jones assumes that they are brutal and straightforward. Borges and Kodama have a more mystical approach, though the difference is subtle. They also explicitly link the poem to Ecclesiastes chapter 12, the famous statement that there is a time for every season, and that matters will turn out as they must. As a result their translation reaches for faint biblical echoes, for a kind of brutal sympathy. They speak in dialogue with the “you” who is dead, where Jones alternates to an omniscient third party. The rhetorical patterning

of the Borges/Kodama translation is very strong, and certainly biblical in inspiration. Their work here is really intriguing.

Moreover, “The Grave” is not a well-known poem. It appears written in at the end of a late Old English volume of homilies, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 343. This is a famous collection of sermons, a mixed collection including sermons by the major players of Anglo-Saxon England. “The Grave,” copied at the very end of the manuscript in a blank space at a later time, has a couple of sentences which are very close to one of the Worcester fragments, nowadays called “The Soul’s Address to the Body.” The similarity could be a shared source, or a joint response to the idea of oncoming death. These texts fall into the gap between the supposed end of Old English and the texts generally called early Middle English. Moreover, the last three lines of the poem, which Borges and Kodama translate, are a later addition: they concern how the interlocutor’s head will soon lose all its hair, the hair all its beauty. It’s an interesting text, and particularly interesting that it is one of seven texts chosen for this brief anthology. Clearly Jorge Luis Borges and Maria Kodama had an ampler sense of what Old English included than do many modern critics.

In the last two decades of his life, Borges became a literary lion, invited to speak at many North American universities and to give interviews on his work and his ideas. On every single occasion he was asked about the onset of his blindness and how he engaged with this shocking change in his circumstances. In almost every answer, Borges speaks of choosing to engage in the new experience of engaging with the language of Old English. Thus, for example:

When I lost my eyesight for reading purposes, I said: This should not be the end. “I will not abound”—as one of the writers I should have mentioned said—“in loud self-pity.” No, this should prove the beginning of a new experience. And then I thought: I will explore the language my forefathers spoke. They may have spoken it in Mercia, in Northumbria, now called Northumberland. I will go back to Old English. And so, with a small group, among whom was Maria Kodama, we began the study of Old English. I know many pieces by heart. Very fine poetry. Not a sentimental line in it. A speech for warriors, for priests, for sailors also, and you find that, some seven centuries after Christ, the English were already looking at the sea. In the early poetry you find the sea around the corner all the time. This happens in England. You find wonderful lines like *on flodes æht feor gewitan* “to travel far under the power of the ocean.” And I have traveled far from the power of the ocean, and here I am, very happily, in the center of your continent, and my continent also, for I am a mere South American. My continent is America.

Borges himself roams from Old English and the English of his own ancestors, the English which was his own first language in his home, through “The Wanderer” which was clearly a touchstone poem for him, and to his conception of his own place in the world. He is a South American currently speaking in America, embedded in American culture. And yet a “mere South American,” someone on the margins. Borges certainly knew that the study of Old English was marginalized in North America, and even in England, and yet he presents it as central. And for him it is central.

Notes

- 1 *Twenty-Four Conversations with Borges, Including a Selection of Poems*. Interviews by Roberto Alifano 1981–1983 (Housatonic, MA: Lascaux Publishers, 1984), p. 37. Both quotations come from the opening of the dialogue entitled “Poetry.”
- 2 See Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorges Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), pp. 461–462.
- 3 The vexed question of Borges’ relationships with women (or lack thereof) takes up a vast amount of critical space. A recent and helpful book which provides all the available evidence, in a somewhat tabloid style but with judicious conclusions about each of Borges’ close friendships and connections, is Mario Paoletti, *Las novias de Borges (y otros misterios borgeanos)* (The Girlfriends/Fiancées of Borges and other Borgesian mysteries) (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2011).
- 4 Graham Greene, “Latin America and Other Questions”, in *In Memory of Borges*. Ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni. pp. 55–64; the quotation is p. 55.
- 5 Greene, p. 55.
- 6 “The Thing I Am,” quoted from Jorge Luis Borges, *Obra Poética 1923–1985* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1989), p. 543. The poem originally appeared in *Historia de la Noche* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1977). Translations in this chapter are mine unless otherwise indicated. Note especially that the English title of this poem is Borges’ own.
- 7 See M.J. Toswell, “Auden and Anglo-Saxon,” *Medieval English Studies Newsletter* (Centre for Medieval English Studies, Tokyo) 37 (December 1997): 21–28.
- 8 That Borges wanted such a trip is clear; in his “Autobiographical Essay” he says “Another daydream of mine is a pilgrimage to Iceland, and another still to return again to Texas and to Scotland” (p. 258). Texas was the site of Borges’ first stay as Visiting Professor and he very much enjoyed himself, lecturing and reading but also taking classes in Anglo-Saxon from Rudolph Willard (“Autobiographical Essay,” p. 255). Since Norman Thomas di

- Giovanni translated the texts in *El Aleph*, and edited the “Autobiographical Essay,” he would certainly have known how much of a dream this was.
- 9 “Autobiographical Essay,” p. 252.
 - 10 See Joseph Tyler, “Medieval Germanic Elements in the Poetry of Jorge Luis Borges,” *Readerly/Writerly Texts* 1:1 (Fall/Winter 1993), pp. 97–106.
 - 11 See Vladimir Brljak, “Borges and the North,” *Studies in Medievalism* XX (2011): 99–128. The quotation is p. 116, and the poetic references are footnotes 36 and 37 on pp. 127–128. Seventeen poems are listed as specifically medievalist in their focus, and more than 40 on other topics have brief medieval references. Probably for reasons of space, Brljak is only able to discuss this material in two paragraphs.
 - 12 Jorge Luis Borges, *Poems of the Night*. Ed. Efraín Kristal (New York: Penguin, 2010), pp. 106–107. The facing-page translation, which I have quoted here, is by Alastair Reid.
 - 13 Borges, *Poems of the Night*, pp. 86–87. The translation is by W.S. Merwin.
 - 14 The version of the text in *Poems of the Night* is confirmed by that in the *Obra poética 1923–1985* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1989), pp. 250–251.
 - 15 “1985” in Jorge Luis Borges, *The Sonnets* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010), pp. 300–301. The translation here is by Stephen Kessler; I have used his version for the first line and a half of the poem, but my own for the last line: his reads “something the wind takes that is never gone.”
 - 16 “Hengist Cyning” in Jorge Luis Borges, *Obra Poética 1923–1985*, pp. 220–221.
 - 17 “Composición escrita en un ejemplar de la gesta de Beowulf,” in *The Sonnets*, pp. 56–57, translation by Alastair Reid, and in *Obra poética 1923–1985*, p. 219.
 - 18 Martin S. Stabb, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 54.
 - 19 “Autobiographical Essay” in *The Aleph*, p. 251.
 - 20 “Las Kenningar” in *Historia de la Eternidad* (1935; Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1971), pp. 47–70. The reference to kennings as *penosas ecuaciones* (laborious equations) is p. 49.
 - 21 “Las Kenningar,” p. 50.
 - 22 *Las Obsesiones de Borges*. Una Entrevista de Dante Escobar Plata (The Obsessions of Borges. An Interview with Dante Escobar Plata) (Buenos Aires: Editorial Distal, 1989), p. 43. The interviews took place, the interviewer states, during several sessions in the months just before Borges died, in 1986. There is extended discussion of medieval Germanic material, and after the passage quoted here Borges goes on to offer a summary, obviously from memory, of his argument in *Las Kenningar*.
 - 23 The essay collection in which *Las Kenningar* was first published would also repay study. *Historia de la Eternidad* begins with the eponymous essay on time and eternity, investigating Plato and Plotinus (Plotinus was a frequent reference for Borges), and then considering the Christian exegesis on the subject starting with Augustine and continuing with John Scotus Eriugena.

After the papers on kennings and the metaphor previously mentioned, there are two pieces on what he calls the doctrine of the cycles, the sense of time as circular, juxtaposing Nietzsche and Augustine and Zarathustra, and mixing in Edgar Allan Poe, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell. The longest piece in the collection assesses the translators of the *1001 Nights*. In many ways, this collection lies at the very heart of Borges' thinking.

- 24 See Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 5. His translation ends "No man can tell,/ no wise man in hall or weathered veteran / knows for certain who salvaged that load" (lines 50–52).
- 25 C.A. Jones, trans. *Old English Shorter Poems Volume 1: Religious and Didactic*. *Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library*, vol. 15 (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 365.

4

Borges the Scholar and Writer

Abstract: *Although Borges' highest degree was his matriculation from a high school in Geneva, he was a scholar and thinker throughout his life. He obtained a post as professor at the University of Buenos Aires in 1955, and delivered a course of lectures, recorded by students, on the history of English literature. The chapter then turns to his notable study of ancient Germanic literatures published in collaboration with Delia Ingenieros in 1951, and republished with some alterations in collaboration with María Esther Vásquez in 1965 or 1966. The chapter also assesses the bestiaries that Borges produced in collaboration with Margarita Guerrero. After briefly considering Borges' love of Dante, the chapter concludes with consideration of the response to Borges' medievalism by his contemporaries and critics over the years.*

Keywords: *Antiguas literaturas germánicas; bestiary; Borges' Lectures on the History of English Literature; Delia Ingenieros; El libro de los seres imaginarios; Jaime Alazraki; Margarita Guerrero; María Esther Vásquez; Nueve ensayos dantescos*

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In the spring of 2010, I was preparing for a freighter trip around the world. I knew from previous voyages that while the ship was at sea communications would largely be cut off (phone calls were a dollar a minute from the bridge, and the satellite communications system was for ship's business only, with the sending and receiving of e-mail through the captain's account something to be used only in real need). I needed to take with me discrete projects, and the kind of projects that I might not get to back in my real world. I decided that I wanted one project that was pure fun for me, something that would employ some mental muscles that had gone slack over the years of teaching and researching Old English psalters, so I thought of doing some translation. I had known for many years that Borges was interested in Old English literature, so I dug into his works to see if I might find something of a middling size that I could shift into English from Spanish. I found his *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, in two versions from 1951 and 1965, sorted out which one I liked, packed a photocopy of the text and a couple of general works on Borges, uploaded a dictionary program from Spanish to English lent by a colleague, and tossed in a couple of dictionaries. The freighter line, the last one accepting passengers all the way around the world, was the Rickmers Pearl line, a line of multipurpose freighters expert in loading not just containers but more complicated kinds of cargo. After we had left behind a yacht in Dubai (a very pretty yacht) and were heading for Kuala Lumpur, the ship encountered very rough seas. In a somewhat hallucinatory state, as I rolled back and forth across my single bed trying in vain to jam a toe somewhere to give myself some leverage, I realized that this situation called for Borges. And so, my first contribution to the scholarly study in English of Borges' study of Old English and Old Norse medievalism was accomplished with a following surge (and a tornado wandering about) in the Persian Sea heading south to the Indian Ocean. By the time we were off the coast of Sri Lanka ten miserable days later, arriving in calm seas with a pleasant following wind, my first draft was complete. As we neared Kuala Lumpur, while passing through the notorious Straits of Malacca, I finished a second draft and some introductory material.

Borges, of course, never engaged in higher education.¹ His highest degree was his time at the Collège Calvin in Geneva, which although admittedly a demanding high school requiring a full knowledge of Latin and a broad range of other subjects, was not a postsecondary institution. He embarked upon his writing career immediately after secondary school, starting in 1919. And yet, he was equally right when he applied

in 1955 for the professorship of English and American literature at the University of Buenos Aires with a simple sentence stating that, as he put it himself, “Quite unwittingly, I have been qualifying myself for this position throughout my life.” As he concludes, “My plain approach gained the day. I was hired, and spent ten or twelve happy years at the University.”² His lifelong love of English and American literature had paid off. It seems best, therefore, to begin with some materials that only became available in the twenty-first century, printed versions of the lectures he delivered at Buenos Aires, as tape-recorded and transcribed by some of his students. The idea of accessing a professor’s ideas through the notes taken by students has, of course, profound medieval implications. In many cases, our only access to a scholastic thinker at the Sorbonne or a legal thinker in Bologna is through the notes and commentary of their students. Borges would have been amused, bemused, and perhaps rather gratified to learn that his words had been so faithfully recorded, saved, transcribed, and republished.

The lectures come from 1966, and the editors and translator had to do a lot of work in the transcription and preparation of the material, ranging from decoding student versions of various names and ideas to adding in words so that sentences would make sense. The result is 25 lectures, which reflect an idiosyncratic approach to English literary history. That history ends for Borges at about the year 1900, as the last lecture covers Robert Louis Stevenson, especially *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, taught as a successor text to Jekyll and Hyde. And the penultimate lecture, lecture 24, is the third on William Morris, discussing his version of the *Völsungassaga* and then introducing Robert Louis Stevenson. Borges’ medievalizing tendencies are clear in his approach to all of English literary history. The structure of the entire 25 lectures is this: seven lectures on Old English; three lectures on the eighteenth century focusing on Samuel Johnson and passing over the time in between the end of Old English and the beginning of the eighteenth century in four short paragraphs; five lectures on the romantic movement focusing on its major poets and Ossian; four lectures on the Victorian era including Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Robert Browning; five lectures on the pre-Raphaelites focusing on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris; and the last class on Stevenson and Wilde. It’s a stunningly personal and quite remarkably romanticized view of English literature.

To begin with the assessment of the lecture series, Borges generally was not good with dates. His dating of Old English poems reflects a very shaky perception of the history and philology of the period. The best example might be the date at the top of the very first lecture, which is "Friday, October 14, 1966."³ The lecture concerns the early history of the Anglo-Saxons and the structures of their poetry. The Battle of Hastings is mentioned. However, Borges clearly did not know that the Battle of Hastings took place on October 14, 1066; he liked coincidences and would no doubt have commented on the 900th anniversary of the battle being on that day had he known. He does, however, discuss the verse structure, including the alliteration and meter. He describes kennings as metaphors, correctly, as sometimes very beautiful but states that they "ended up hobbling poetry, so they were slowly abandoned. In Scandinavia, on the other hand, they carried them to their final stage: they created metaphors out of metaphors by using successive combinations."⁴ These were certainly Borges' conclusions about kennings in the 1960s. He seems to have reached his own conclusions entirely about these elements of the poetic lexicon, as the kennings tend otherwise to be seen rather as graces and accomplishments, not failures of sense and hobbles upon the verse. These are, perhaps, the conclusion of a poet faced with an approach he cannot replicate in his own language.

The next six lectures consider the heroic poetry of Anglo-Saxon England, clearly Borges' first and deepest love. The analysis of the *Battle of Brunanburh* incorporates extended discussion of the translation by Alfred, Lord Tennyson of that Old English poem; it also pulls together details of the invasion by the seven kings, and from *Egil's Saga* includes the involvement of Egil and his brother (although Borges is not familiar enough with the text to provide the brother's name, Thorolf). In other words, Borges pulls together details of the battle at Brunanburh from a broad range of sources, and makes it live for his audience. He points out, for example, that medieval battles were often short and brutish; if they began at dawn, they could be won and lost in a matter of hours. This battle, however, lasted all day and into the dusk, presumably because the two sides were fairly evenly matched. No strategist, then or now, wants an even match but there was no choice on this battle: the king of England was fighting for his kingdom, and the seven invading kings would not have produced such a consortium again. The heroism implicit in the engagement is what interests Borges. Earlier, he compares the heroism in *Beowulf* to the *compadritos*, the slang term used in Argentina to refer

to the “little friends” of the criminal world. He makes the connection specifically in terms of bragging, since in the modern world this kind of behavior is generally unacceptable except in specific ways. But, he suggests, in the world of the *compadritos*, those who live by their reputation and their word, this behavior is not just acceptable but necessary. Borges’ analysis of *Beowulf* focuses on heroism, on kings, on the mythic undertones of the attacks of the monsters, on the text as an epic. He does an impressive job of thinking about individual words; for example, on the famous crux of *isig*, (discussed in the previous chapter), a term used for the funeral ship of Scyld Scefing in the opening of the poem, Borges says:

The poet says that this ship was “*isig ond utfus*.” The first word means “frozen,” and is related to the English word “iced” and the German word *eisig*. But we don’t know if the ship is covered with ice (it is strange that the poet hadn’t spoken of ice earlier), or if he meant “resplendent,” “shimmering,” “as clear as ice.” The third word is difficult to translate because *fus* means “eager” and *ut* means “out.” In other words, the ship was eager to leave, as if it were a living being.⁵

This kind of analysis seems likely to have been the sort of work done in the Saturday and Sunday classes that Borges held, when he and a select group of enthusiastic students, mostly women, delved into Old English texts.

Borges does draw conclusions about the poem. He argues that translations of the Bible into Germanic languages were appropriate because those languages were so very different from Latin. And for this poem, he suggests that “*Beowulf* was the first epic poem written in a vernacular language” precisely because that vernacular language of Old English was so very different from Latin. He proposes that the Anglo-Saxon willingness to write an epic (for Borges all poetry was written, and literature is a written construct) derived from there being no connection to Latin and to Latin epics such as the *Aeneid*. His conclusions resonate with nineteenth-century approaches to the field, predictably and particularly with the attitudes of W.P. Ker, and his easy links from text to text placing works in a broader literary context are something that modern scholars would never do, but might envy. Names and their etymologies fascinate Borges: he tends to offer detailed analyses of the names of protagonists, such as Hildeburh “castle of war” or “castle of the battle,” Finnsburh “the castle of Finn” (which is linked to the French *bourgeois*, the Spanish city Burgos, and the many cities ending in -burg or -burgh in Europe), and even Sigeferð “victorious spirit,” described by Borges as the Saxon form of “Siegfried.” He discusses the Vikings, the Celts, and focuses on the late “Battle of Maldon” in some detail for its heroic and stoic elements. He calls

the poem a ballad, an intriguingly acute term. The analysis is charming and idiosyncratic, such that when Borges turns to Christian texts in the middle of lecture five, it is to point out that Cynewulf was an early cryptographer and someone who, like Walt Whitman and Leopoldo Lugones, liked to refer to himself in the third person. Cynewulf's technique of encoding his name runically into the endings of his poems occasions some further thoughts on his psychology. However, Borges firmly concludes that "The Christian poems are, to my mind, the least worthwhile of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Except the elegies."⁶ He begins his discussion of elegies with Ezra Pound's adaptation of *The Seafarer* and the Old English poem, comparing its approach and ideology to Whitman's "Song of Myself."

The last two classes on Old English continue with *The Seafarer*, focusing on its involvement with the sea, which introduces a peculiarly English theme for Borges. He considers several other elegies for their central themes of isolation and exile, and for their imagery of ruined architecture and destroyed human habitation. He draws the following conclusion:

Now, we will never know if these English poets, possibly of Celtic origin, realized what an extraordinary, revolutionary thing they were doing. It's very possible they didn't. I don't think there were literary schools at that time. I think they wrote these verses because they felt them, and that they didn't know they were doing something so extraordinary: how they were forcing an iron language, an epic language, to say something for which that language had not been forged—to express sadness and personal loneliness. But they managed to do it.⁷

Linguists would enjoy picking apart Borges' assumptions here about the fundamental nature of languages. English, for him, was a language of epic and heroism which could be wrenched by great poets into a language of sorrow and expressiveness. He speaks as a poet, characterizing the whole of Old English as Tennyson or Carlyle would have been tempted to do. His is the reaction of the intelligent and enthusiastic observer at this point. He works through the poems describing what happens and giving his views about the situations that develop. For the "Dream of the Rood" or the "Vision of the Cross," for example, he focuses on the speech by the cross, and takes the poem as a kind of elegy. Finally, Borges in an extended lecture considers the extant bestiary texts on the panther and the whale, including the poem "The Phoenix," as an allied text. The discussion of the panther is intersected by rumination upon a reference of T.S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets*: "Came Christ, the tiger." Borges clearly wants to link together Eliot's reference to Christ as a tiger with the panther as a

Christ figure; the tiger, of course, was his totem animal. He discusses the riddles briefly, although they interest him, and the post-Conquest poem in Old English, “The Grave” at much greater length. He was to translate this poem into Spanish 12 years later, as discussed in the previous chapter. Borges argues that “this poem was written with so much intensity that it is one of the great poems of English poetry.”⁸ The poem is a short lyric, and a touching one, describing the grave as a kind of doorless and tiny house, the last place where a human goes. It would be difficult, however, to argue that it is “one of the great poems of English poetry.” The last part of the class discusses the battles of Stamford Bridge and Hastings in the year 1066, using a variety of sources to tell the well-worn tales of Harold Godwin’s offer to his brother and insult to Harald Hardrada. On Hastings he makes use of Heine’s *Schlachtfeld bei Hastings* “The Battlefield of Hastings,” which notably tells the tale of Harold’s mistress finding his body.

At the start of Class 8, Borges advises that “We are going to leave the eleventh century, take a leap, and land straight in the eighteenth century.”⁹ And that is precisely what he does. It does have to be said, however, that Borges’ interest in Old English and Old Norse pervades the entire set of 25 classes. He looks closely at William Morris’ translations of Icelandic sagas, focusing on Gunnar from *Njal’s Saga* and the story of Sigurd the Volsung: these are the two classic examples of pure heroes from Icelandic literature. Other powerful and fascinating warriors and warrior-poets exist, but Gunnar and Sigurd have the purity of action and motive that Borges favors. The lectures as a set offer a quite fascinating set of images about what interested Borges. No doubt his deep interest in English literature and English literary history was an unusual obsession, but no doubt either that it was genuine and important.

Slightly earlier than this set of classes, though no doubt depending on an earlier round of the lectures, is one of a group of collaborative scholarly projects that Borges engaged in at this time. His delight in collaboration has already been discussed here, and it can be difficult to disentangle his work from that of his collaborator—all of them for this scholarly work younger women, women with whom he was often pursuing a more personal relationship.¹⁰ This collaboration is with María Esther Vázquez, and the book was *Introducción a la Literatura Inglesa*, first published in 1965, and republished by Borges in his *Obras completas*.¹¹ This is a brief text, an introduction indeed, totaling fewer than 50 pages in the

Complete Works. Each era, most of them centuries, garners a few pages. It does seem likely that Borges wrote the first on the *Época Anglosajona* (the Anglo-Saxon epoch) himself. He describes Old English as the oldest of the vernacular literatures of Europe, offers a brief history of the origins of Anglo-Saxon England, discusses the primacy of poetry since it came before prose, and briefly introduces a few poems. He describes Christ in *Dream of the Rood* as “el joven guerrero, que es Dios Todopoderoso” (the young warrior, who is God the All-Powerful).¹² The oldest surviving poems are the fragment of Finnsburh and the *geste* which is *Beowulf*, which Borges argues as having been an intentional attempt to provide a Germanic version of the *Aeneid*. He also discusses the *Battle of Maldon*, *The Ruin*, *The Wanderer* (which in Spanish is *El vagabundo*, “The Vagabond”), and *The Seafarer* (*El navegante*). He finishes with a reference to Kipling, who treats the same theme of the harsh world of the North, and to *Deor*. Intriguingly, the next chapter, largely addressing Chaucer as the relevant figure from the fourteenth century, finishes with a reference to how one of Chaucer’s tales also occurs in the *Thousand and One Nights*, and notes that Chesterton wrote an excellent book about Chaucer. There ensue chapters about drama, focusing on Shakespeare; the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century, the Romantics, nineteenth-century prose (finishing with the friend of Joseph Conrad and William Henry Hudson, Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, who spent a good part of his youth in Argentina—Borges does not lose his Argentinian focus, although sometimes it can be difficult to discern), nineteenth-century poetry jumping from Blake to the Victorians, the end of the nineteenth century, and what is called *Nuestro Siglo* (Our Century) including Henry James, G.K. Chesterton, D.H. Lawrence, T.E. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Victoria Sackville-West, James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, Robert Graves, Charles Langbridge Morgan, T.S. Eliot, and finishing with E.M. Forster. The focus is both English and idiosyncratic. Concerning William Morris’ translation of *Beowulf* (but not his translation of the opening of the *Odyssey* or his translation of the *Aeneid*, which was clearly on Borges’ mind), the author notes that Andrew Lang described the language of his *Beowulf* translation as somewhat more archaic than the original from the eighth century. Borges concludes: *Pese a la lentitud que algunos críticos le reprochan, fue un gran poeta* (Despite the sluggishness for which several critics criticize him, he was a great poet).¹³ Unlike many modern critics, Borges had no problem expressing his critical *juicio*, his judgment or assessment.

The book on Germanic literatures

The history of this work is relatively complicated. It begins as early as 1932, when Borges first published in the area with a beautifully printed pamphlet of some 20 pages entitled *Las Kenningar*.¹⁴ It had already appeared in an earlier version in *Sur*, entitled “Noticia de las *kennigar*” [sic]. He had also referred to it as *Los Kenningar*, so in his early studies of the phenomenon Borges confused both spelling and gender. The work does not garner a great deal of critical attention, save from Sylvia Molloy. She points out that an essential trope in Borges’ work is the idea of divergence, which might resemble the way the avant-garde poets, including the ultraists Borges had known just before his return to Argentina, approached the idea of metaphor. However, she points out, “the Borges who takes note of such wonders [the organic satisfaction of understanding a kenning, which is an end in itself] has stopped sharing (if he ever truly did share) the pious belief of many of his contemporaries in the omnipotent virtues of avant-garde metaphor.”¹⁵ Borges finds truth in kennings, according to Molloy, and he believes in their potential to recharge meaning. Ultimately, Molloy argues, his interest in kennings “confirms Borges’s unquestionable attraction for what is out of turn, out of text, for *non-sense*.”¹⁶ Molloy’s argument is particularly intriguing, in that she is that rare critic of Borges who does think about his interest in kennings. However, she does not seem entirely to grasp what Borges admired about kennings. After his detailed analysis of examples from the sagas of Grettir and Egil, Borges compares kennings to the stylistic approach of Gracián with its laborious periphrases. When he turns to his own consideration of their role in Germanic literatures, his focus is on their functionality. They are rhetorical flowers that are functional, a set of useful products: as he says, “Predomina el carácter funcional en las *kenningar*” (What dominates the kennings is their functional character).¹⁷ Borges then provides a catalogue of examples of kennings, about a hundred, taken from Snorri Sturluson. His concluding analysis points out that the earliest development of this usage is in *Beowulf*, for which he offers many examples, but that the real impetus for the kenning is the delight in compound words. Kennings, Borges points out, can be taken to extremes, at which point they are useless. However, the delight in coining compounds remained in English literature; Borges closes with examples from Chapman and Kipling, and in a postscript from Morris in *Sigurd the Volsung*. The pamphlet itself, described by Williamson as

being “as *recherché* an essay as Borges had ever written,”¹⁸ became the central kernel in Borges’ next piece of Germanic study.

The survey study, *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (Ancient Germanic Literatures), was published as a collaboration with Delia Ingenieros, daughter of José Ingenieros, a writer and thinker known to Borges’ father. It remains unclear how much involvement Ingenieros had in the project; most likely she did some research and editing. The work was published in 1951 in Mexico, and Borges reused it, with vanishingly few changes, in 1965, now as a collaboration with María Esther Vásquez, and entitled *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (Medieval Germanic Literatures).¹⁹ Vásquez has maintained her rights with respect to the latter book, but as Brljak points out, “the latter is a fairly slightly revised version of the former.”²⁰ The section revised is that concerning Old English, which does suggest that Borges continued to learn and investigate the field. He downplays the paganism he had so enjoyed when younger, and is more careful about dates and about investigating a broader range of Old English texts. The book itself will serve as “both an introduction to the ancient Germanic literatures for the student, and also—as best it can given its brevity—an anthology.”²¹ In other words, this introductory book is perhaps the first by Borges in scholarly mode; it comes five years before he obtained the post of professor and only just after he had lost his job as a librarian and been obliged to begin lecturing and teaching to earn a wage. He had previously written short notices, articles in literary periodicals and newspapers, and the pamphlet concerning kennings—but this book is a major step in the direction of serious scholarship. It even begins with the usual scholarly indications of what remains to be done: Borges points out that someday the relevance of the saga to its descendant, the novel, will be articulated, as will the true history of the metaphor.

The first chapter addresses Ulfilas and Old Gothic in two pages, the result of a need for comprehensive coverage of the Germanic languages and literatures. The second chapter addresses Anglo-Saxon England at some considerable length, quoting from scholarly sources (mostly from the late nineteenth century, but Stopford Brooke is a favorite critic). Unlike most commentators on Old English, Borges always draws links to later literature, for example, comparing Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” for its delight in alliteration and offering a quotation from Tennyson’s version of what Borges calls the ballad, *Brunanburh*. He tells the stories of Old English, from the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons to the plot of *Beowulf* to the story of Caedmon. The structure of the chapter is

somewhat idiosyncratic, as Borges moves from poem to poem as seems best to him; Cynewulf appears as a whole but the bestiary has its own entry, as does “The Phoenix” and “Solomon and Saturn.” Near the end of the chapter Borges turns to individual prose texts, including the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Bede. Layamon comes at the end of the chapter, described by Borges as “the last English poet of the Saxon language,” despite the fact that the Saxons are abhorrent and the Celts commanded by Arthur are the true English figures. Borges approves, however, the warlike spirit. Scandinavian literature is the topic of the second and longest chapter of the book. Here, although Borges is less comfortable with describing the prosodic structure, he finds a lot of tales to tell and he tells them well. The tale of Harald Fair-Hair’s conquest of Norway flows into a series of Viking epitaphs all over the known world and from there into the tale of Odin’s death at the court of Olaf Tryggvason. Borges is comfortable offering judgments and comparisons. For example, he enjoys the poems of the *Poetic Edda*:

The poems of the Major Edda are gnomic, narrative, burlesque and tragic, discussing the affairs of gods and of heroes. Unlike the slow, laboured and elegiac Anglo-Saxons, the anonymous poets of the Edda move rapidly—at times to or past obscurity of meaning—and energetically. Desperation and anger are frequent, not melancholy.²²

His references to Old Norse words and titles are uncertain, sometimes with correct spellings and diacritics on the vowels, and sometimes not. But he clearly enjoyed the energy and engagement of the Norse texts. His analysis of them is enthusiastic and even captivated. He quotes the famously understated comment by a dying warrior at Gunnar’s house in *Njal’s Saga*, not sure if Gunnar is home, but sure that his spear is. There is more quoting from translations of the sagas and the poems than for the Anglo-Saxon material, and less reasoned assessment. He states, for example, that “The saga was an objective chronicle of historical facts; from this develops the sheer impersonality of its presentation.”²³ Few scholars, even in 1951, would have agreed with this characterization of the sagas as essentially historical. The way in which the sagas play with history and literature has always been their most essential element.

Embedded in the midst of Borges’ survey of the sagas are the central sections of *Las Kenningar*, including the references to Gracián. Otherwise, however, the extended discussion of the Norse poems, sagas, and historical works is detailed and careful. As he states elsewhere, as far as Borges is concerned, “la cultura germánica llegó a su culminación

en Islandia y produjo una literatura muy rica" (the Germanic culture reached its culmination in Iceland and produced an extremely rich literature).²⁴ This material is the height, the apex of Germanic literature. Borges wishes to do it justice, and gives it extensive analysis. At the end of the chapter, Borges gives short biographies of Ari the Historian and Snorri Sturluson (a man for whom Borges has a good deal of sympathy), and ends with Saxo Grammaticus. He is interested in the real history of Scandinavia and Iceland, as well as the literary history. One might almost suggest that considering the history of this warlike nation of northern Europe gives Borges a perspective on the warlike nation that is Argentina—except that he makes no explicit link on this point whereas, occasionally, he does draw parallels to Spanish literary moments. The longest section of the chapter gives a detailed plot outline of the story of the Volsungs, the *Völsungassaga*. This story he had probably known well since childhood, since his father gave him translations by William Morris of the Norse sagas, probably including Morris' hybrid version of this Norse saga with its Old High German cognate the *Nibelungenlied*: Morris published his composite text as *Sigurd the Volsung*.

The last chapter addresses Old High German literature, reviewing its earlier works in a relatively cursory manner and focusing in on the two texts with Norse parallels: the *Nibelungenlied* and *Gudrun* or *Kudrun*. These receive much more detailed plot analyses and assessment; concerning the poet of the *Nibelungenlied* Borges suggests that although we might grieve the loss of the marvelous, which has greater rein elsewhere, the poet "helped to construct the road which runs from the fairy-tale to the novel."²⁵ However, unlike for Anglo-Saxon literature, which for Borges presages many elements of later English literature, and unlike for Old Icelandic literature, which Borges describes as fully legible in every way in modern-day Iceland, the early literature of Germany in no way leads to the great works of later years. Old High German reaches a dead end, and modern German literature started anew. Borges closes the book with two appendices explicating aspects of the Old High German material, and a relatively detailed bibliographical note which identifies the sources he used both for the texts themselves and for his analysis. Whatever one might think about Borges' conclusions in the volume, he took it seriously and worked hard at preparing a solid and helpful introduction to Germanic medieval literature in Spanish. For the second edition, published in 1965, the entire text was read through and various points clarified or corrected. Only in the Old English section were there

substantial changes, all of them in the direction of including more texts and more analysis.

Bestiaries

With Margarita Guerrero, Borges produced two different versions of a medieval bestiary, the first in 1957 and the second in 1966.²⁶ The bestiary work therefore corresponds in time with the more obviously scholarly work that he was doing, including the study of Germanic literature. The bestiary work is the one thing not identified by any other critics as a part of Borges' medievalism: even Vladimir Brljak does not include the bestiaries in his superb analysis of Borges' involvement with the North. Yet, Borges explicitly discusses the Old English bestiary texts in his lectures and in his book, explicitly linking both the panther and the whale with Christian symbolism and tying both together with later developments in English literature. He uses Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, T.S. Eliot, the *Book of a Thousand and One Nights*, John Milton, and Herman Melville as comparanda in his discussion of the bestiaries—a sure sign that Borges took these texts seriously in the wider context of English thinking. Moreover, given how much time he must have put into the bestiary passages, and how much of his own imagination is given free rein to play and to enjoy the creation of extraordinary new creatures, it seems obvious that the bestiaries have a lot to tell critics.²⁷ However, it has to be admitted that the information in there is more thoroughly encoded than in any of his other works. If there are elements of the *roman à clef* in there, as I suspect there are, they are well hidden in bestiary tropes and ideas.

In the bestiary analysis of "The Panther," for example, Borges points out that the panther in question is nothing like the carnivore of modern zoology. He quotes Aristotle, Pliny, and the Bible, before turning to the Anglo-Saxon bestiary in the Exeter Book (it includes only the panther, the whale, and a bird usually entitled "The Partridge"). He quotes from "The Panther," including that its age-old enemy is the dragon who is also the devil. The panther is therefore Jesus Christ—not at all a wild beast. The entry finishes with a quotation from Leonardo da Vinci which describes the panther's beauty, its terrible basilisk-like and hypnotic stare, and its carnivorous speed of attack.²⁸ The entry exactly reflects both the Anglo-Saxon poem that was its inspiration, and Borges' own highly eclectic reading in European literature and thought. The Old English bestiary entry for the whale includes its name, Fastitocalon, which Borges repeats several times in his scholarly studies; it is hardly surprising that

here an entry is entitled “Fastitocalon.” Also, Borges includes “brownies,” Scottish beings that are willing to do domestic chores overnight and are mentioned by Robert Louis Stevenson.²⁹ The entries range across many literatures and cultures, and include some idiosyncratic and individualized ones: “An Animal Imagined by C.S. Lewis,” “The Ass with Three Legs,” and “The Cheshire Cat and the Kilkenny Cats.” In other words, this is Borges at his most exuberant, his most quirky, his most imaginative. Many poems were generated from this material; for example, “The Golem” entry in the bestiary reflects Borges’ deep interest in the Kabbalah, and he reuses this knowledge and the bestiary ideas in a poem that he republished several times entitled “El Golem.” However, the many scholarly works that investigate Borges’ symbolism do not refer to the bestiary.³⁰ Not understanding his medievalist thinking, they do not understand how much of his symbolism has its roots in this material.

Bestiaries are certainly difficult texts. As Richard Barber points out, “the object of the bestiary is not to document the natural world and to analyse it in order to understand its workings.”³¹ The bestiary is about the purpose of Creation, in the wholly religious sense. Every creature in a bestiary is a moral lesson and a mystical one; sometimes the allegory is obvious and easy, but sometimes it is subtle and highly theological. A bestiary, a physiologus, assesses the natural world as advancing a Christian agenda. Borges had no such agenda, but he clearly understood the medieval approach, making use of it for many of his entries. The Borges bestiary is alphabetical in structure, and in addition to the Greek and Latin *Physiologus* animals (pelican, basilisk, salamander, elephant, unicorn, amphisbaena), and the additions from the later bestiary tradition of France and England (ante-lope, crocodile, mantichore), it has many beasts taken from other folklore and mythological traditions, as well as the quirky additions from literature and present-day life that interested Borges. One example relevant to the Old English and Old Norse material under consideration here will have to suffice to introduce this fascinating text:

The Trolls

In England, after the advent of Christianity, the Valkyries (or “Choosers of the Slain”) were relegated to the villages and there degenerated into witches; in the Scandinavian countries the giants of heathen myth, who lived in Jotunnheim and battled against the god Thor, were reduced to rustic Trolls. In the cosmogony opening the Elder Edda, we read that in the Twilight of the Gods, the giants, allied with a wolf and a serpent, will scale the rainbow Bifrost, which will break under their weight, thereby destroying the world.

The Trolls of popular superstition are stupid, evil elves who dwell in mountain crannies or in ramshackle huts. Trolls of distinction may bear two or three heads.

Henrik Ibsen's dramatic poem *Peer Gynt* (1867) assures them their immortality. Ibsen depicts the Trolls as, above all, nationalists. They think, or do their best to think, that the foul concoction they brew is delicious and that their hovels are palaces. So that Peer Gynt would not witness the sordidness of his surroundings and the ugliness of the princess he is about to marry, the Trolls offer to put out his eyes.³²

Obviously, this entry is a new one by Borges. It manages to include the three ideas that were concatenated in his mind: blindness, Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse thinking, and the possibility of romantic love. As a bonus, eschatology appears. The bestiary allowed Borges absolute poetic license and he enjoyed the opportunity to include some of his greater imaginative flights.

Dante

Finally, and rather briefly because it betokens a quite different literary tradition, though still a medieval one, Borges found Dante Alighieri fascinating, both for the eschatology of the *Divina Commedia* and for its construction as a dream-vision with a female muse, a hoped-for lover, constructed as an indispensable feature of the narrative. There are references to Dante throughout Borges' work, but the strongest link between his interest in Dante and his interest in Old English emerges in the *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (Nine Dantesque Essays), not published until 1982, although the five central papers were published in 1948 and a sixth in 1951. In other words, Borges was thinking about Dante when he was writing his study of Old English and Old Norse. In fact, when María Kodama on Borges' behalf published a translation of his nonfiction into English, she labeled the entire set of papers on Dante as written between 1945 and 1951.³³ This seems likely to be right. Borges more specifically compares the dream vision of Dante with the otherworldly visions Bede describes about the Irish ascetic Fursa and the Northumbrian man Drythelm. Borges offers a detailed account of Drythelm's vision of hell, noting afterward the passages that prefigure Dante. Borges explicitly states that he does not think that Dante had read Bede; he does, however, point out that where for us Bede is an early Anglo-Saxon historian, in the Middle Ages he was a thinker and scholar of Christianity. As such, he formed part of a tradition of thinking about the issues that later fascinated Dante.

Both were part of a tradition of thinking and pondering the central issues of the human spirit. As is Borges.

* * *

At this point it may be possible to begin delineating the parameters of Borges' medievalism. It was very much at the center of his own thinking. He approached other texts in English literature using an Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse lens, always thinking—in a way not paralleled by the literary scholars of English—about how a given modern text reflected its early medieval forebears. For Borges, learning more Old English and studying more Old Norse was a true passion, and a genuinely scholarly passion. He also found ways to incorporate other medieval materials into his thinking, notably Dante. However, the way in which he approached Dante was much more formal and intellectual than his approach to Germanic medieval literature. Similarly, although he occasionally mentions the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Poema del Mio Cid*, he does not draw comparisons from them to Argentine *gaucho* behavior. Nor does he draw detailed comparisons of the difficult and sophisticated poetry of Luis de Góngora with the equally difficult and sophisticated poetry of the Norse skalds and the Old English *scops*; these comparisons do not occur to him. His approach is not Eurocentric, nor is it Anglocentric: it is explicitly a Germanic medievalist and medievalizing mode of thinking. Perhaps this explains why Borges' northern medievalism has received so very little attention from his critics.³⁴ For example, compare the comments made by the eminent Borgesian critic Jaime Alazraki in the introduction to a major collection of critical essays about Borges. I quote here an entire paragraph in order to give a clear sense of the thought sequence:

Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican novelist and author of a very fine essay on Latin-American fiction, has written in it that "without Borges's prose there simply would not be a modern Spanish-American novel." But he has also added: "The big vacuum in Borges is, we all know it, his lack of a critical perception of society and the imagination." Borges has contributed to reinforce that sense of remoteness his Spanish-American readers find in his writings. When asked about his fellow writers in Latin America, either from his generation or a younger one, his answer has been invariably the same: "I cannot give an opinion on a writer I haven't read." His blindness is no excuse. He has olympically ignored his own tradition and, at the same time, he has found time (and sight) to continue his study of Old English and Old Norse. In a

very oblique way, Borges has either scolded or discarded the tremendous accomplishments of Latin American writers of the last fifty years with the exception of some of his own friends.³⁵

In other words, Borges' medievalism was specifically focused on early medieval England and its languages. He was well aware that Old Norse and Old English were both spoken in the area of northern England he claimed for his paternal ancestry, and that the two languages had some level of mutual intelligibility. He was well aware of the literary materials produced in the two languages, and was genuinely knowledgeable about the plots and themes of those materials. And Fuentes finds all of this knowledge offensive; it ignores the Spanish and Spanish-American influences and approaches that Borges should be acknowledging, in favor of some material that should have been completely foreign and uninteresting. Alazraki finds it more offensive, stating outright that Borges' blindness is no excuse. He should, for Alazraki and for Fuentes at this point, have been interested in his own compatriots, not in this distant and difficult—and, of course, largely disconnected—material from early England.

Elsewhere, Fuentes offers a somewhat different assessment, and one which acknowledges Borges' broad range with less contumely: "Borges broke down the barriers of communication between literatures, he enriched our Spanish home with all the imaginable treasure-houses of world literature, East and West."³⁶ Here, the criticism of Borges offered elsewhere is muted, no doubt partly because this was one of a set of lectures in honor of Borges and to improve the relationship between Argentina and England. However, Fuentes also recognizes Borges' cosmopolitanism (while ignoring his medievalist interests) here, and in the most positive of terms. This kind of comment is fairly common among Borgesian critics: Adolfo Ruiz Díaz, in a biographical analysis, argues that "Borges es, en grado eminente, un escritor que opera con la lúcida conciencia de su lugar en una vastísima tradición literaria" (Borges, in the highest degree, is a writer functioning with the most lucid understanding of his place in an extraordinarily vast literary tradition).³⁷ That Borges was at home in the world was entirely acceptable, and perhaps even laudable as far as other Latin American writers and thinkers were concerned. That he was most at home with the odd byway of Old English and Old Norse was well-nigh incomprehensible. If not denigrated publicly, it was ignored, and perhaps privately abhorred. This reaction to Borges' northern medievalism, while perhaps not entirely comprehensible to a present-day northern medievalist, would be completely normal in Argentina, in South America, and in the entire Spanish-speaking

world. A man whose work was revered in that world as establishing the modern Hispanic and Hispano-American literature, giving postmodernism a strong starting point and heading down the road toward magic realism: such a man should, by rights, be fully and permanently engaged in the Spanish-speaking world. That Borges' inspiration came in large part from outside that world, and that he nearly fetishized his fascination with Old English and Old Norse—especially in his later years—this would be deeply disturbing, an attack on the core of the Hispanic soul.

Borges' Germanic medievalism could therefore be read as a kind of insistent refusal to accept the place prepared for him as the grand old man of Spanish-American letters. His continued references, in very nearly every interview and discussion, every talk and very many articles and short stories and poems: all this was a way of distancing himself, of rejecting the heritage that others felt he should embrace. When his mother questioned his interest in the field, as she did, he ignored her comments and continued forward. His political and social interests suggest a deep disappointment with how his homeland was functioning; he never achieved any kind of happiness in his personal life until his last years; his working life was more than a little fraught. Small wonder that his rebellion involved not reading his younger contemporaries, not engaging more than he had to with a society he felt alienated from, and choosing instead to learn a language and literature that no one around him could or would engage with. It would be all his, his to engage with and to use, his to assess and to interpret. No one could gainsay him when he wrote in Spanish about Old English and Old Norse. He had authority.

Notes

- 1 His most judicious biographer, Edwin Williamson, points out that Borges did not even achieve a high school diploma, and also suggests that the elegant explanation of his achievement of the post at the University of Buenos Aires was not perhaps as much an "unsought-for honor" as the result of some string-pulling by his mother. See Edwin Williamson, *Borges: A Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004), p. 336. As an odd aside, I have to say that in none of the biographies can I find an end point for the professorship. He certainly mentions teaching in 1968 and later, and to classes in Old English at the National Library later, but was also very free to travel and take visiting professorship appointments or lecturing requests in America and Europe. The post appears to have offered Borges a lot of latitude in his workload and lecture times.

- 2 See "An Autobiographical Essay" in *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969*. p. 250.
- 3 Jorge Luis Borges, *Professor Borges: A Course on English Literature*. Edited, researched, and annotated by Martín Arias and Martín Hadis. Translated by Katherine Silver (New York: New Directions, 2013), p. 1.
- 4 "Class 1," *Professor Borges*, p. 5.
- 5 "Class 3," *Professor Borges*, p. 12.
- 6 "Class 5," *Professor Borges*, p. 45.
- 7 "Class 6," *Professor Borges*, p. 52.
- 8 "Class 7," *Professor Borges*, p. 62.
- 9 "Class 8," *Professor Borges*, p. 71.
- 10 These collaborative works clearly mattered to Borges, as he organized them all and reprinted them in various volumes of his collected works: see *Obras completas en colaboración vol. 2. Con Betina Edelberg, Margarita Guerrero, Alicia Jurado, María Kodama y María Esther Vásquez* (Buenos Aires and Madrid: Emecé Editores and Alianza Editorial, 1972 and 1983). Delia Ingenieros does not appear here, her work having been superseded by Vásquez.
- 11 Jorge Luis Borges con la colaboración de María Esther Vásquez (with the collaboration of Maria Esther Vasquez). *Introducción a la Literatura Inglesa*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1965. Rep. *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974).
- 12 Borges, *Obras en Colaboración*, p. 810.
- 13 Borges, *Obras en Colaboración*, p. 844.
- 14 Jorge Luis Borges, *Las Kenningar* (Buenos Aires: Francisco A. Colombo, 1933). Nowhere does the pamphlet mention the previous publication in *Sur*. It does, however, provide a very handy list of books in English and German that Borges found useful for his work. He relies, for example, on the prose translation by John Earle, *The Deeds of Beowulf* published in Oxford in 1892. For the sagas he also uses translations into English, although for Old Norse poetry he used both English and German sources. His up-to-date source is Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur's translation of Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, published in New York in 1929. The book, critical for the argument in this pamphlet, must have been something Borges acquired very soon after publication, and since at this time he was in Argentina, the book made its way there for him.
- 15 Sylvia Molloy, *Signs of Borges*. Trans. Oscar Montero, and adapted in collaboration with the author (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 91.
- 16 Molloy, *Signs of Borges*, pp. 92–93.
- 17 Borges, *Las Kenningar*, p. 11.
- 18 Williamson, *Borges, A Life*, p. 187.
- 19 Jorge Luis Borges con la colaboración de Delia Ingenieros, *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (Mexico & Buenos Aires: Fondo de cultura económica, 1951).

The book has a second edition of 1965. However, the retitled volume, and somewhat reorganized one, dates from 1965 or 1966: Jorge Luis Borges, con la colaboración de María Esther Vásquez, *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (Buenos Aires: Falbo, 1966).

- 20 Brljak, "Borges and the North," p. 110.
- 21 See Jorge Luis Borges, in collaboration with Delia Ingenieros, *Ancient Germanic Literatures*. Trans. M.J. Toswell. Old English Publications: Studies and Criticism Volume 1.
- 22 Borges, *Ancient Germanic Literatures*, p. 33.
- 23 Borges, *Ancient Germanic Literatures*, p. 42.
- 24 See María Esther Vásquez, *Borges: Imágenes, Memorias, Diálogos* (Caracas, Venezuela: Monte Avila Editores, 1977), p. 61.
- 25 Borges, *Ancient Germanic Literatures*, p. 91.
- 26 Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero, *Manual de zoología fantástica* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957). The prologue indicates that the work was completed by January 29, 1954. See the altered listing for the second publication: Jorge Luis Borges con la colaboración de Margarita Guerrero, ilustraciones de Baldessari, *El Libro de los seres imaginarios* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kier, 1967).
- 27 The bestiary entries are hardly mentioned. One intriguing use opens an analysis of Borges' images and metaphors, playing with the double relationship of author and subject, authority in the text, and the monkey squatting by the ink-pot and drinking the ink left over after the author finishes; see Alicia Borinsky, "Repetition, Museums, Libraries," in *Jorge Luis Borges: Modern Critical Views*. Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 149–160, at pp. 149–150.
- 28 Jorge Luis Borges with Margarita Guerrero, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. Revised, enlarged and translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969), pp. 178–179. The bestiary seems to have been a genuine coauthorship situation with Guerrero, which may perhaps explain why these texts are less frequently republished by Borges as his own work. And yet, this was one of the texts Borges included in his collaboration with di Giovanni; moreover, in the translation he added several new bestiary items. This text was at the core of his work during his most productive period of publication. For more on the rewritten version in English, see Norman Thomas di Giovanni, *The Lesson of the Master* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 27.
- 29 Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, p. 48.
- 30 "The Golem" is in Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, pp. 112–114. A highly sympathetic and careful study of Borges' symbols is Beatriz Borovich, *Los caminos de Borges: La Kábala, los mitos y los símbolos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial

- Lumen, 1999); the discussion of the Golem is “¿Quién nos dirá las cosas que sentía Dios? ... ‘El Golem’” (who will tell us the things that God felt... ‘The Golem’) and it recounts the rabbinic origins of the Golem in detail, but not the full range of Borges’ engagement with it, pp. 65–67.
- 31 Richard Barber, trans. and introduced. *Bestiary, being an English version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M.S. Bodley 764 with all the original miniatures reproduced in facsimile* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), p. 7. See also a text Borges might have used to help with the second version in Spanish, and the expanded version in English (really his third version): Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962).
 - 32 Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, p. 225.
 - 33 Jorge Luis Borges, *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1982). See Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*. Ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 1999), pp. 265–305.
 - 34 The examples abound, and it is hard to pick one. However, see *Borges y su herencia literaria* (Borges and his literary heritage), co-ord. Jose Luis de la Fuente (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 2000). One might expect a book with this title to acknowledge a heritage other than Hispanic and Hispano-American literature, yet there is little admixture of English literature, let alone medieval literature. Some postmodern and science fiction authors in English appear (Paul Auster, Gene Wolfe) but even for the bestiary texts the authors on p. 98 cite the following as the sources: “*La Biblia, Las mil y una noches*, Homero, Hesíodo, Plinio, Ovidio, Paracelso, Burton, Swedenborg, Flaubert, Scott, Stevenson, Wells y toda una amplia serie de autores, creaciones y colecciones previas de diferentes épocas y latitudes (fundamentalmente Asia, Europe y el norte de África, aunque también América)” [the Bible, the *Thousand and One Nights*, Homer, Hesiod, Pliny, Ovid, Paracelsus, Burton, Swedenborg, Flaubert, Scott, Stevenson, Wells and a large collection of other authors, creations and collections coming from different time periods and latitudes (fundamentally Asia, Europe and north Africa, although also America)]. This list of sources could be analyzed for its preconceptions for some time, but here let me simply note that there is but a hint of the genuine origin of the bestiary in the Anglo-Saxon bestiary here, if the different time periods’ reference is put together with the reference to Europe.
 - 35 “Introduction,” *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges*. Ed. Jaime Alazraki (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987), pp. 1–19, quotation pp. 6–7. The collection consists of newly commissioned assessments of Borges, all drawn from an American perspective since that is where Borges’ fame was the greatest at the time of the collection. The quotations that Alazraki cites are from Carlos Fuentes, *La*

nueva novela hispanoamericana (The New Hispano-American Novel) (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1969), p. 26.

- 36 See Carlos Fuentes, "The Accidents of Time," in *The Borges Tradition*, ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London: Constable, 1995), pp. 51–69, quotation at pp. 52–53.
- 37 Adolfo Ruiz Díaz, *Borges* (Buenos Aires: Ciudad Argentina, 1998), p. 46. On the front cover of Ruiz Díaz' book is a photograph of the elderly Borges on his knees in front of an elaborate bookcase. In light of my argument concerning Borges' interest in the fantastic and especially in the medievalist fantastic, it should be noted that a hardback English copy of *The Return of the King*, the third novel of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien, is clearly visible on the middle shelf.

5

Borges the Fabulist

Abstract: *This chapter analyzes a selection of Borges' short stories for their obvious medievalism, and in particular for their use of Germanic medievalism whether explicitly or not. In some cases it considers the fables already recognized as involving his interest in Old English and Old Norse, but in others it addresses texts not obviously medieval in their inspiration. The chapter concludes with consideration of the kinds of texts that Borges was prepared to use for his work, and his place in his own modern and Argentinian world.*

Keywords: *El informe de Brodie; El libro de arena; magic realism; medievalism; modernity; Old English, Old Norse; "Pierre Menard: Author of the Quijote"; postmodernity*

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In 1991 or 1992, I was visiting a friend in Toronto and talking about literature and ideas. It was a stretch for me, as my friend had a profoundly philosophical mind, framed in a deeply European way. She was working on a novel, one that she suspected she might not finish (and indeed she did not). Its title was *The Man with No Memories*, and she explained to me the basic idea, that her protagonist woke up every morning with no memories. Once he was delivered to work, he was clever and able to pick up his job and do it, because he remembered all the unimportant things like how to use his computer, how to write, how to supervise staff. But, he couldn't remember names, incidents, passions. I suggested this sounded like some science fiction short stories that I knew. She scoffed at me. This was a much more profound set of issues than science fiction authors ever dealt with. This was about the human condition. I didn't argue with her, but suggested that the other author who had come to my mind was Borges. My friend, Helen Weinzwieg, lit up. She had always wanted to be compared with Borges. His approach, his level of ambiguity and uncertainty, his ability to write short and extraordinary fables of the human condition: these were the kinds of abilities she wanted to cultivate. I pointed out that she was well recognized, at least in Canada, as a remarkable postmodern novelist, a writer of spare and imagistic prose that was already thoroughly Borgesian. She also favored dense and difficult situations, and her plan for this book, which was to start each day fresh, and on each day to create a situation for which her protagonist could not possibly have any resources, and investigate what would happen; this was a complicated plan. She spoke of neurological conditions and creating situations that no one could resolve, let alone someone with no fixed point in his universe at all. It was, for me, a thoroughly Borgesian conversation.

Borges' short stories are his most significant international legacy, having been translated into dozens of languages and inspired whole critical and literary movements. A modernist, a highly subversive figure of the late twentieth century whose work questions the place of the individual in the world and expresses a quite shocking alienation from society, Borges marks the center of many kinds of postcolonial and postmodern thinking. To pick up an example used previously, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" is famously a *tour-de-force* investigating the notion of originality and authorship in ways both clever and profound. It is seen as intervening in a literary tradition deriving from the Russian formalists, questioning the very basis of the idea of focusing literary interpretation in the biography of the author. It forces the reader to think about the

importance of the author's name, and highlights how haphazard is our approach to a text if the author's name is the first clue we interpret in its reception.¹ At the same time, Borges was quite possibly thinking about the medieval attitude to authority. In the Middle Ages, it was right and proper to invoke authority, and even more right and proper to suggest that one's own contribution to a story was slight, a matter purely of presenting it in a different language or a different form. In other words, a medieval author would emphasize the sameness of the text, would be likely to disclaim all innovation; if innovation did happen, it had to be in the spirit of the original and be presented almost as something the authority would have written if it had been possible. Innovation was bad; the best thing for any given text was a rich traditional authority. In other words, the things that make "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" subversive and theoretically aware in the modern era are precisely the same elements that make it an exactly appropriate medieval text—but in an equally subversive way since medieval writers claimed to be following their authorities exactly, often at precisely the moment they were most thoroughly departing from them. Borges near the end of the story argues "I have reflected that it is permissible to see in this 'final' *Quixote* a kind of palimpsest, through which the traces—tenuous but not indecipherable—of our friend's 'previous' writing should be translucently visible."² Literally speaking, a palimpsest is a manuscript which has been scraped down so that another and more valued text can be written in on top. In the Middle Ages, Latin and Greek manuscripts were scraped to provide an opportunity for preserving Christian commentary and doctrinal texts. Many of the Greek and Latin poets survive today only through palimpsestic copies, on which indeed the previous writing is translucently visible, especially with modern lighting techniques. Borges is playing in two directions, arguing forward to the modern questioning of authority and backward to a medieval conception of authority—and satirizing both.

Knowledge of the Middle Ages and of Borges' medievalism helps interpret a second example; "Brodie's Report" is the title story of *El informe de Brodie* (Brodie's Report).³ It begins with a highly literary reference to Lane's translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*, the translation that Borges read as a child, and it plays on the idea of the manuscript found inserted into the pages of the book. Thus a fabulous text appears enfolded by an already fabulous and medievalist text. The enfolded tale is apparently a social anthropologist's description of a newly discovered tribe somewhere. The first page of the manuscript is lost, which calls to

mind the lost first page of the *Battle of Maldon* (a text Borges analyzed in his book), now existing only in an eighteenth-century copy of the original eleventh-century manuscript. Another text which is acephalous (without its opening or head) is *Judith*, a poem Borges also discussed which comes after *Beowulf* in the Nowell Codex. That lost page apparently contained all the situational information, both geographically and chronologically, so that the description that ensues rather floats free. Borges uses a medieval structure, with king and queen, and four counselors who he terms witch-doctors, and a people remarkable for going to heaven if they are “happy, hardhearted, and bloodthirsty on earth.”⁴ These are precisely the greatest virtues of the Old English and Old Norse heroes beloved of Borges, although in this short story these virtues are cast in doubt, at least slightly. The social hierarchy is simple, the lifestyle very simple as well. Their god is “mutilated, blind, frail and possesses unlimited power.”⁵ This is a marvelous amalgam of science fiction novels from the 1950s, H.G. Wells, the half-blind and mutilated Norse leader of the gods (Odin), and the Christian god as Borges frequently describes him (Jesus Christ suffering on the cross but filled with divine power).

Where Borges’ medievalism really comes through is near the end of the story, with his analysis of the language, the diversions, and the poetry of these people. He calls them Yahoos, channeling Jonathan Swift, but describes their language in terms of the metaphors that make it, and the ways in which it can be contradictory. The tribe once had a written language, with inscriptions that for the writer are like runes of the northern and Germanic kind; this appears as a kind of nostalgia for *temps perdu*, an awareness of an earlier time when the nation was more fully developed. It is now, rather like so many other nations (or so Borges implies), degenerate. The amusements of the tribe include fights and executions. Also, Borges/Brodie describes a new poet as shrieking out his works in the midst of a circle of the leaders and tribesmen—rather as Caedmon did (possibly without the shrieking) in the story as related by Bede. The poet, now touched by the god, can now be killed by anyone. Borges enjoys these little contradictions in presentation. At the end of the report, he identifies, rather as an anthropologist would, the strengths of this tribe, and argues for saving these people. The report has something of the flavor of a superior nineteenth-century missionary wanting to save a new tribe for Christianity—but Borges/Brodie has explicitly indicated earlier that no conversion had taken place or was likely to take place. It also has something of the dry satire of a Swift, but the mutilations visited

upon the king and the strange taboo on eating suggest perhaps a more serious purpose. Mostly, for a medievalist, the tale brings to mind the travelers' tales of Marco Polo, of Ohthere and Wulfstan (as translated by Borges himself), and of the Old Norse warriors who enjoyed traveling deep into new lands and trading there or protecting them (as the protagonist does, resembling Egil Skallagrimson, for example). "Brodie's Report" calls to mind some stories of Borges' favorite Scottish writer, Robert Louis Stevenson, given that the protagonist is from Scotland, returns home at the end, and rejoices in a great red beard. It also calls to mind many of the medieval materials Borges most enjoyed, especially including the assessment and interpretation of language and culture. "Brodie's Report" has a kind of brutal and honest realism, unpleasant in many ways, but exactly the kind of honest and blood-thirsty behavior that Borges claimed as the birthright of the Argentinian *gaucho*, the English *eorl*, and the Icelandic farmer.

"Funes, the Memorious" (*Funes el Memorioso*) is one of Borges' most famous short stories, published in the expanded edition of *Ficciones* (Fictions) in 1956.⁶ It introduces a young man whose memory contains everything, but he cannot get it organized. The narrator, a split of Borges putatively named Bernardo Juan Francisco, describes the "implacable memory" of Ireneo Funes. The issue of memory and of organizing knowledge was dear to Borges' heart; he was, after all, a professional librarian. But it was also dear to him because it was a critical issue in Christian theology and doctrine in the Middle Ages; there was a continuing effort to corral all knowledge into encyclopedias, natural histories, or *Summae theologiae* such as that of Thomas Aquinas. C.S. Lewis once famously stated that the medieval monk would have been thrilled at the discovery of the card catalogue; were he alive today the analogy would be the computer database. Organizing knowledge, and getting it set in place so that all of humanity would be properly organized to worship God: these were typical medieval preoccupations, and Borges would have known it. The short story depends heavily on Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, a natural history rediscovered and copied in the medieval period, and its dependence on Pliny is remarkably medieval. Mary Carruthers has analyzed and discussed the many ways in which memory could be structured and invoked in the Middle Ages: the classic method was to imagine a house and put each item to be remembered into a different room, or concatenated with others in a pattern that was spatial as well as logical.⁷ Borges would have been aware of this medieval effort to contain memory. As

Naomi Lindstrom points out, the central issue of the short story is “the need to organize knowledge in the mind by means of judicious omission and the selective concentration of attention.”⁸ This is a profoundly medieval concern.

Moreover, Ireneo Funes’ lifestyle appears derived from that of Thomas Aquinas, at least according to the stories Borges would have known. He is entirely sedentary, entirely focused on small details, willing only once a day to engage with the outside world. His voice is high-pitched, and he excels in Latin. His memory is prodigious. Funes is immobilized by a horse which threw him, which differs from Aquinas but brings his story to Argentina and its *gaucho* culture, and to Borges’ propensity for telling doubled tales. His philosophy addresses numbers, numerology, symbols, words, memory—also all matters on which Aquinas opined. Funes reveals what Borges calls “a certain stammering greatness.”⁹ And yet, the narrator considers him incapable of thought, and overly replete with details. He is a cataloguer, someone who can observe and organize every detail, but comprehension may well be beyond him. The great Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who produced a *Summa Theologica* which established a philosophical basis for God and for Creation, is renowned in common parlance for his laser focus on tiny details. Funes the Memorious is his modern counterpart, perhaps his own Borgesian *alter ego*.

My last preliminary example to demonstrate how reading Borges’ fables through a medieval lens can be worthwhile is the unusual and dense story, “The Sect of the Phoenix” (elsewhere called “The Cult of the Phoenix”). Central to this story is a quotation from the great collector of Latin glosses, Du Cange: *Orbis terrarum est speculum Ludi* “The world is mirror to the game.”¹⁰ Hernán Díaz points out at some length the occurrence of this chess analogy in several of Borges’ poems, in the short story “Guayaquil” where it appears as a reference to two kings playing chess in the *Mabinogion*, and elsewhere in what Díaz calls a “fractal model of the universe” typical of Borges.¹¹ The story probes both conspiracy theories and conspiracies, discussing a ritual, a Secret, with an ancient, possibly Greek, Egyptian, or Latin origin (to judge by the incoherent list at the beginning of the story). Those who follow the Phoenix—and Borges would certainly have known the phoenix as a bestiary creature, an allegory for the rebirth of Christ and for the possibilities of resurrection—are a universal sept. Borges plays with Christian liturgy in his depiction of initiation into the sept, and the role of the priest or “mystagogy” can be played by a “slave, a leper, a beggar.”¹² The liturgy itself requires few materials, and they are even optional: “cork,

wax, or gum arabic.” Shortly after implying the innocuous nature of the initiation rite, Borges states that, “In Germanic literature there are poems written by sectarians, whose nominal theme is the sea, say, or the evening twilight; but they are, I can hear someone say, in some measure symbols of the Secret.”¹³ Later he quotes Juan de la Cruz (translated somewhat oddly, perhaps to emphasize the medieval character of the moment, as John of the Rood). In other words, Borges himself was thinking through the way in which liturgies developed in the early Christian church, how sacraments gradually accreted to the focal ceremony of the Eucharist, and how mystery became a central feature.

In preparing the story, Borges was probably thinking about some of the great sects of the Middle Ages, their rise and fall. The story is often interpreted as being an oblique approach to sex, with the initiates simply enjoying their opportunities to have sex once brought through the ritual of indoctrination as children. Bizarre sexual practices and secret initiations were central to the persecution and destruction of the Knights Templar in the early thirteenth century; and yet folk mythology has the Templars still surviving today in a secret sept, perhaps somehow allied with the Masons. These connections are almost certainly bizarre, but Borges exploits this conspiracy theory in order to probe why human beings are so prone to want to believe in conspiracies.

In other words, reading Borges’ short stories, even those that are not obviously medieval in their inspiration, can be illuminating about what influences he was feeling and using. However much reality cannot be apprehended in his stories, it can be approached through some of his own thinking. Jaime Alazraki uses “La otra muerte” (The other death), a short story concerning the medieval thinker Peter Damian, as the central story for his analysis of Borges’ themes and ideas, but never quite notices that Peter Damian’s existence at the turn of the twelfth century is just as important as the complexity of the structures of reality, the confrontation with concepts of destiny, the contradictions of life and death.¹⁴ Borges’ medievalism was deeply seated in his psyche and his approaches.

Old English and Old Norse in the short stories

The debt even the short stories of Borges owe more specifically to Germanic medievalism has not often been remarked, except perhaps in the consideration of one of his most personal stories, from *El libro de*

arena (The Book of Sand). “Ulrike,” which begins with the epigraph from the *Völsungassaga* that appeared on Borges’ tombstone, tells in five short pages of a romantic encounter between a Colombian university professor named Javier Otálora (the first-person protagonist) and a Norwegian woman named Ulrike.¹⁵ The story is very obviously a *roman à clef* for Borges and María Kodama. They were certainly together at York, and the swords of York mentioned in the story figure largely in several of Borges’ poems. One could almost argue here that Borges does what he says is a remarkable accomplishment for Old English poets; he has turned his love for a harsh and difficult Anglo-Saxon world into a mode of expressing very deep emotion. When he states in *Professor Borges* how unlikely and how difficult it is to turn Anglo-Saxon epic ideas into deeply felt personal reactions, he foreshadows his own attempts in this line, notably “Ulrike.”¹⁶ This story perhaps offers the most obvious example of Borges’ use of Old English and Old Norse for his own stories; it ties together his love of the north with the romantic love for Ulrike/María.

Elsewhere in the same volume are several more stories explicitly referring to Old English. Some of the references appear to be glancing ones: thus in “El otro” (The Other) the elder protagonist, Borges at the age of 70 says to the younger (Borges at the age of 19) that “I study Old English, and I am not at the bottom of the class.”¹⁷ The lovely Old English *litotes*, the understatement here, notes that Borges at 70 is “not at the bottom” when he has actually called the class and run the class and learned the language, on his own and with very limited eyesight. The story plays with the role of the protagonist and the author, and reality and dream-visions. In short, although the Old English reference is to Borges in real life, where he does study Old English and has learned lengthy passages by heart for declaiming, it also evokes the dream-vision essence of the story. Similarly, in the title story of the collection, “The Book of Sand,” the narrator trades his pension check and his “black-letter Wiclif Bible,” inherited, as he says, from his ancestors, for the Book of Sand, an infinite book, a holy book, something that had been acquired out on the Argentinian plains by a man from the Orkneys.¹⁸ The book of books had been bought for a handful of rupees and a Bible. Its sacred importance is evident from the fact that twice it has changed hands for a Bible. The first Bible is a Presbyterian one, and the stranger from the Orkneys in the north of Scotland feels that his trade has been an eschatological one, the Bible for a “devilish book.”¹⁹ Borges offers a black-letter version of the Wiclif Bible, a medieval translation of the Bible into English that was heretical, and when printed (black-letter

is either a very early print of the book or a nineteenth-century copy done by someone like William Morris, who liked to copy and use early fonts) remained unacceptable in England for some decades. In other words, Borges trades a medieval Bible, but one with a complicated history, for a book whose salient feature, since the words are written in two columns in an unreadable language, is illuminations, illustrations that disappear once the page is turned. Readers always experience this vertiginous loss of words and illustrations, usually when searching for the one page or image that they want to find again. But Borges, as one would expect, pushes the point so that his book of sand (with no beginning and no end, recalling the biblical metonymy of sand as standing for all of creation and human life) becomes existential and infuriating. Eventually, recalling Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," he returns to his former place of employment, the Biblioteca Nacional of Argentina, and hides the book, more or less in plain sight, on a shelf heading downward. No doubt this image of a librarian with a monstrous and impossible book—a thoroughly medieval book since it contains everything and nothing—is what inspired Umberto Eco to create his antagonist Jorge de Burgos, a librarian at a monastery who uses books to kill the impious in *The Name of the Rose*. The medievalism of both authors is at the forefront of their creative work.²⁰

"The Bribe" (*El soborno*) uses Old English as part of the *mise en scène* of the story, in that the fable concerns two English professors at the University of Texas in Austin. Borges, of course, held his first Visiting Professorship in English at this university, for a term starting in September 1961.²¹ The professor with whom Borges studied Old English at the university during his time there was Rudolph Willard; the professor of Old English at the university in the short story is Ezra Winthrop. There are two further figures, both of course male, in the story: Herbert Locke, a long-standing member of the faculty notable for his diffidence and his support of Winthrop over many years, and an *arriviste* scholar of Old Norse from Iceland who also publishes in the field of Old English. The story is an intricate one of academic rivals and decisions; it could be argued that the Norse scholar, Eric Einarsson (named Eric the Red by the students for his hair color, and by Borges for his take-no-prisoners desire to get on in the academic world), bests the more senior Germanic expert. All the references demonstrate Borges' knowledge of the field of Old English: even Elphinston is given as the transcriber of the *Battle of Maldon*, which the younger scholar edits. The story was, of course, published long before Elphinston was rejected in favor of David Casley as the eighteenth-century

transcriber who preserved the poem for future generations. Even the fact that a major colloquium in the field of Germanic studies happens annually at Michigan State University is quite correct. Borges knew not only the field of Old English, but he mined it for details and played with it, satirizing its petty jealousies (in and of themselves typical of the academic world) and competitions. Both men, Einarsson and Winthrop, mutually accuse each other of vanity at the end of the story, the one for wanting to boast of his cleverness in using the other's extreme fairness against him, and the other for having been proud of his extreme fairness.

In the story Borges even takes the opportunity to press some of his own views about Old English and Old Norse, placing them in the mouths of the other characters. Herbert Locke gives the narrator (a split of Borges himself, told in the first person) a "copy of his book *Toward a History of the Kenning*"; he argues, in a book that Borges probably felt himself fully capable of writing, that the Anglo-Saxons stopped using kennings but the Old Norse skalds "went on combining and interweaving them to the point of inextricability."²² This, too, is Borges' own argument. It could also be argued, I think, that Borges in this case was on the side of Winthrop, who behaved with excessive probity and whose only sin was being proud of his ethical correctness. Such a pride would for Borges be the pride of Beowulf, secure in his own accomplishments, willing to do the more difficult and correct thing. In other words, on one level the story is about a relatively petty academic *contretemps*, on another it is about how careers are lost and won, and on a third it is about doing the right and ethical thing. The postscript to the story, in which Einarsson points out that both he and Winthrop are American, but that Winthrop would "say that a passport does not change a man's nature," perhaps suggests that at its base the story is about the vagaries of human nature, and not university politics.²³

A complex fable, "The Disk," set in the early medieval period in a northern Saxon forest, juxtaposes Christianity and worship of the Norse gods, contrasts a king with a woodcutter.²⁴ The deposed and exiled king expects obedience because of his possession of a one-sided token of kingship, the king of riddling behavior that Borges would have enjoyed.²⁵ The woodcutter offers to trade gold, which does not exist, for the hallmark of authority, and when refused kills the king by subterfuge. The disk disappears, refusing to go to an unworthy person. The language of the story reads like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, with many deictics, simple and short paratactic sentences, no hypotaxis. The story works like a fable, or an allegory. Other stories in *The Book of Sand* also reflect this

new outbreak of Germanic medievalism. It runs deep in this collection, deeper than in many of his other selections of short stories and essays.

One of those other selections is the one entitled *El Hacedor* in Spanish, but *Dreamtigers* in English by its translators in consultation with Borges himself. The references to Anglo-Saxon England in the collection run through its length, including, for example, the mention in “Mutations” that Harald Sigurdarson (better known as Harald Hardrada) earned “six feet of English earth forever,” just as in the narrative Borges delighted to tell.²⁶ The piece, as Bell-Villada puts it, “wistfully remarks on how certain objects—arrows, lassos, crosses—in distant times were basic tools of existence and a source of genuine awe but today are innocuous symbols, artifacts of everyday decor.”²⁷ “The Witness” offers a rereading of the conversion from paganism to Christianity, a rereading that rather recalls the story behind “Caedmon’s Hymn” in Bede’s construction of the miracle that brought together Germanic poetic techniques with Christian content. In what would today be called a postcard story, or a short-short story, Borges describes “a gray-eyed, gray-bearded man” asleep in a stable, a man who will die before morning as the last soul who remembers the pagan gods. The story reflects in several directions fascinating to Borges: the death of Odin in the night just outside the court of Olaf Tryggvason, the overlapping of the story of Caedmon who was given creativity and possibility as against this sad and sorrowful fable in which a certain kind of belief is taken out of the world. As Borges points out, “the world will be a little poorer when this Saxon dies.”²⁸ The piece goes on to ponder issues of memory and death. At some point, the last person to remember a particular event dies. The idea is meditative, ruminative, philosophical. The death of the last pagan in Anglo-Saxon England is a profound loss, and one that cannot be remediated. Borges liked to pose questions and complicate their answers. Recognizing the points at which he does this implicitly, expecting his reader to make connections that Borges found obvious, is an important element to interpreting his texts. Borges requires the attentive and sophisticated reader.

* * *

When he writes prose, Borges is first and foremost a storyteller. In the monographs he wrote about various elements of English literature, Borges assembled the stories of the poems and the history, and retold them. He told stories about name origins and even about linguistic features. His interest was in

the stories, unsurprisingly in a very medieval way as something that would exemplify the national character. His prose, for all its Borgesian ambiguities, is also about telling stories, and telling them well. Then, of course, there is the fact, as Alastair Reid points out, that for Borges criticism “is simply a branch of imaginative literature.”²⁹ The essential experience of literature is reaching a point where “the sharp edges of reality quiver in doubt.”³⁰ In his stories, as in his criticism and his commentaries, Borges reaches for those edges where meaning is polysemous, where reality is uncertain, where the meaning of a text is most dubitable. He likes double edges.

A double paradox exists with respect to Borges’ Germanic medievalism in particular.³¹ It was of tremendous importance to him, and he continued working throughout his life on Old English and Old Norse texts at the expense of reading his own Hispanic and Hispano-American contemporaries and younger writers. (Nor was he all that impressed with Spanish literature of earlier centuries.³²) When asked about another living writer, he almost invariably replied that he did not know anything as he had not read that writer. At the same time, this central concern of Borges was not just something that his fellow Hispanic and Hispano-American writers did not share, it was something they found deeply offensive. By concerning himself with the ancient material connecting only to modern English literature (and not even that in the mind of English literary scholars), Borges was rejecting his own heritage and his own world. He found nineteenth-century Argentina interesting and wrote about it, but in the contemporary world he was only interested in the material that struck him as a throw-back, a vestige from an earlier time. And this was obvious to his contemporaries. At the other side of this paradox is the fact that medievalists in the present day have little or no knowledge of Borges. In the field of medievalism, the critical reception of the Middle Ages, Borges is not only not at the center, he is barely hanging onto the periphery. Few students of medieval studies are aware that Borges was a fellow traveler in medieval Germanic literatures, and but a bare few are aware of his work. Borges would have reveled in the double paradox.

Notes

- 1 See, among very many other examples, Alfredo Alonso Estenoz, *Los límites del texto: autoría y autoridad en Borges* (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2013), pp. 15 and 202. I have paraphrased Estenoz here.

- 2 Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*. Ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 36–44, at p. 44.
- 3 Jorge Luis Borges, *El informe de Brodie* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1970); here "Brodie's Report" in Jorge Luis Borges, *Brodie's Report*. Trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999), pp. 91–98.
- 4 Borges, "Brodie's Report," p. 96.
- 5 Borges, "Brodie's Report," p. 96.
- 6 Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1956); in English as *Ficciones*, intro. John Sturrock, various translators (New York: Knopf, 1993). "Funes, the Memorious" is pp. 82–91, translated by Anthony Kerrigan.
- 7 See Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (1990; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); see also "Mechanisms for the transmission of culture: the role of 'place' in the arts of memory," in *Translatio: The Transmission of Culture in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Laura Hollengreen. Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 1–26.
- 8 See Naomi Lindstrom, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), p. 41.
- 9 Borges, "Funes, the Memorious," p. 89.
- 10 Borges, "The Sect of the Phoenix," in *Ficciones*, pp. 131–134. The quotation is p. 133.
- 11 Hernán Díaz, *Borges, between History and Eternity* (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 36–38. The quotation concerning the "fractal model of the universe" is p. 38. Díaz continues to elaborate the idea's connections to many of Borges' central beliefs and concerns through the rest of the chapter.
- 12 Borges, "The Sect of the Phoenix," p. 133.
- 13 Borges, "The Sect of the Phoenix," p. 133.
- 14 Jaime Alazraki, *La Prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1968).
- 15 See Jorge Luis Borges, *El Libro de arena* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1977); "Ulrica" is pp. 15–19. The epigraph is given in Old Norse. The translation used here is Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Sand*. Trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), as "Ulrike," pp. 21–25. Somewhat depressingly, in the English translation the epigraph is also given in English rather than its original Old Norse.
- 16 Borges, *Professor Borges*, p. 52. He states: "I think they wrote these verses because they felt them, and that they didn't know they were doing something so extraordinary: how they were forcing an iron language, an epic language, to say something for which that language had not been forged—to express sadness and personal loneliness. But they managed to do it."
- 17 The quotation is from Borges, "The Other" in *The Book of Sand*, p. 17.

- 18 "The Book of Sand," in Borges, *The Book of Sand*, pp. 117–122; quotation is p. 120.
- 19 Borges, "The Book of Sand," p. 120.
- 20 See Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa* 1980, translated William Weaver, published in English as *The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt, 1983). The villain, Jorge de Burgos, is an elderly blind librarian who will do anything to preserve a conservative *status quo* in the Christian church. Borges would have found this figure rather one-sided and dogmatic, I suspect.
- 21 "The Bribe," in Borges, *The Book of Sand*, pp. 97–104.
- 22 Borges, "The Bribe," p. 98.
- 23 Borges, "The Bribe," p. 104.
- 24 "The Disk," in Borges, *The Book of Sand*, pp. 113–116.
- 25 Alicia Jurado, one of the many women with whom Borges had a firm friendship and with whom he worked, notes that he was a "jugador," someone who delighted to play with language, with expectations. She argues that he is the quintessential writer for other writers of his generation and after. See the chapters "El jugador" and "Las reglas del juego" (The rules of the game) in Alicia Jurado, *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1980), pp. 64–77, and pp. 78–90.
- 26 "Mutations" in Borges, *Dreamtigers*, p. 41.
- 27 See Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), p. 243.
- 28 "The Witness," in Borges, *Dreamtigers*, p. 39.
- 29 Alastair Reid, "Introduction," in Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights*. Trans. Eliot Weinberger (Mexico: New Directions, 1984), pp. 1–5, at p. 4.
- 30 Reid, "Introduction," p. 4.
- 31 This chapter has not addressed more than a small percentage of the stories that are relevant to Borges' medievalism; the aim has been to sketch out an approach. However, almost any other of Borges' short story collections could have been analyzed in these terms. Also relevant would be his early papers in the journal he cofounded, now collected as *Jorge Luis Borges en Sur 1931–1980* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999).
- 32 Borges freely answered questions about what literatures and authors he enjoyed, but he was not often asked about his preferences in Spanish literature. On one occasion, when the interviewer did pursue the point, he admits to liking *Don Quixote* (without on that occasion admitting that he read the epic novel in English first, and loved it most in that language) and Fray Luis de León. Pressed, he admitted to enjoying Saint John of the Cross (probably more as a mystic poem than as a Spanish one) and Garcilaso de la Vega, described as an "Italian poet gone astray in Spain." He found the *Poema de Mio Cid* "dull and unimaginative" and the Arcipreste de Hita not very

important. His preference was for the *Chanson de Roland*, Anglo-Saxon epic poetry, and Scandinavian poetry. This interview is with Fernando Sorrentino, published first as *Siete conversaciones con Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Casa Pardo, 1973), translated as Fernando Sorrentino, *Seven Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*. Trans. Clark M. Zlotchew (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1982); and republished as "Interview, 1973," pp. 115–128 in Naomi Lindstrom, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1990). The quotations are from p. 119, and the specific discussion is pp. 118–120.

6

Borges' Medievalism

Abstract: *The concluding chapter divides Borges' medievalism into three epochs of his life, beginning with the last. In the last 15 years of his life, perhaps influenced by María Kodama, Borges prepared some quite authoritative and intriguing texts, no longer adapting Old English and Old Norse into Spanish or revisiting ideas in his own work, but now translating closely and accurately. In his middle years, Borges approached the Germanic medieval as something of a scholar and thinker, preparing several different analyses of this material, revivifying it in a modernized bestiary, and writing many poems and short stories based on medieval ideas or partaking of medievalist motifs. Finally, in his youth and young adulthood, Borges engaged largely in knowledge of the English medieval, writing many reviews of medievalist and medieval texts, and beginning his lifelong work on the kenning.*

Keywords: *Atlas; Borges' medievalism; Historia de la eternidad; kenning; Las Kenningar; María Kodama*

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As a child and teenager, Borges read medievalist texts in English, Burton's version of the *Arabian Nights*, Rudyard Kipling, G.K. Chesterton, and William Morris' versions of the Old Norse sagas and perhaps of *Beowulf*. No doubt he also read tales of King Arthur and Robin Hood, though he never explicitly mentions these. As a young man he extended this early interest in the romantic medieval with more formal and scholarly learning about the poetic structures and patterns of Old Norse and Old English, especially the kenning. In his early thirties, he not only republished a detailed stylistic analysis of the techniques and usages of the kenning, but also embedded it as the centerpiece of one of his earlier and more important short essay collections, *Historia de la eternidad*. He also accomplished a very large number of reviews of a broad range of texts, most of them English, including medievalist texts such as the stories of Lord Dunsany, a translation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and even H.G. Wells' unusual *Brynild*.¹ In other words, he pursued a broad knowledge of English and European literature. During this period, as he developed and pursued his own voice as an artist, he published reviews and short pieces which point toward the scholarly and creative ideas that inflected his mature work.

About 20 years later, as he was approaching the height of his creative powers, Borges published his first serious scholarly work, a study of ancient Germanic literatures in 1951. As noted earlier, the book reused some of the kenning material from the early 1930s, and in its turn the study was republished almost in its entirety in 1965 under a different title and with a different woman as collaborator. In his fifties and sixties, Borges published extensive scholarly and pseudoscholarly works in the field, including literary histories of English and German literature, and a modern version of a medieval bestiary. During this period he wrote a significant number of poems about Old English and Old Norse subjects, responding to themes and ideas in the texts he clearly knew very well and pondered very deeply. Throughout his life medieval themes and ideas also appeared in his short fiction. And in the last 15 years of his life his medievalism changed in tone and style, so that he wrote about Dante and dream visions, translated Old English poems very competently into Spanish, wrote a version of the *Gylfaginning* which is a kind of meditation on an Old Norse issue that interested him throughout his life, and prepared with María Kodama a lyrical and introspective travel memoir. He even wrote an introductory note to an edition of *Egil's Saga*.² Chronologically speaking, Borges' medievalism falls into three periods: youthful learning and

exuberance, stylistic consideration of a dense and difficult poetic issue in Germanic verse which about 20 years later is reborn as mature enjoyment and scholarly collaboration, and aged delight and meditation. It would be equally reasonable to argue that Borges' medievalism for the first 70 or so years of his life was imbued by a romantic lens and involved projects in which he either engaged in medievalism alone or as the primary collaborator with a series of young or younger women. For the last 15 years of his life, he had a true collaborator, and one who shifted his focus to a more thoughtful and serious medievalism.

Borges' medievalism, 1969–1986

To demonstrate the argument that Borges' medievalism changed its tenor and rigor in the last years of his life, it seems best to start with Borges' last published and collaborative work: *Atlas*. Published in 1984 in Spanish, *Atlas* is an unusual book for Borges, an amply illustrated set of poems and short prose passages, mostly a kind of travel memoir, but also a meditation on the things that matter in life. The title page has Jorge Luis Borges as principal author, but "Colaboración de María Kodama" identifies her as his last collaborator. The translation in English came out the next year, and for it Kodama's collaboration appears to be on the same level, typographically and graphically speaking, as the work of the translator and annotator Anthony Kerrigan.³ And yet, her influence does seem in many ways greater than that of past Borges collaborators.⁴ She appears in a significant minority of the photographs, not as a secretary but as a partner. She seems likely to have taken many of the pictures, especially the solo and soulful shots of the elderly Borges in many of his favorite places. Moreover, this is a Borges at peace, and rather joyful. Martin Stabb perhaps articulates this best, although he does not consider the work to rank with what he calls the "genuinely collaborative works."⁵ He describes Borges' ebullience, accompanied by Kodama, in a balloon about to ascend, and his joy as he pets a Bengal tiger in a zoological park, and concludes:

My personal reaction to *Atlas* and its photographs is one of gratitude. The thoughts and images of the frail octogenarian who joyfully ventures aloft in a balloon and who finally confronts a real tiger, a creature that for years existed only in his readings of Blake or Kipling, are pleasant ones—they help dispel the image, which Borges himself helped create, that he was even in youth

a perennially tired old man. They suggest, by contrast, a rather appealing personality: one characterized by a streak of youthful enthusiasm, of persistent boyishness, and of eternal wonderment.⁶

Stabb engages in something of a personal appreciation here, a purely biographical comment ending the chapter he calls "A Late Harvest" to refer to Borges' remarkable productivity on several fronts in the last 15 years of his life. His point, aside from reflecting the deeply complex way in which criticism of Borges always crosses back and forth between discussion of his life and interests and the philosophical and ambiguous material he writes, also marks a kind of tempered and Borgesian joy. Borges found a different gear in his last years, and changed his approach.

Atlas, then, is something of an extended thought-piece. Borges does not really describe the places in which he finds himself so much as ruminate on their meaning, both historical and contemporary, and for his own life. He also intersperses six poems, including some of his most well-known texts. All of these are fundamentally historical in approach, most of them medieval: "Caesar," describing three emperors of the past and future; "Un lobo" (Wolf); "Los dones" (Gifts), something of a medieval catalogue poem indicating what gifts are god-given to various anonymous individuals, all of whom deserve to enjoy their lives; "Piedras y Chile" (The Corner of Piedras and Chile), commenting on time passing in terms of a sword gleaming in the mists; "Midgarthormr"; and "Milonga del puñal" (The Knife's Milonga), which uses the knife as a metonymy for human decision-making and ends with an address to the knife itself. For Borges, knives evoke ancient swords; he links his own family history and ancestry emotionally and intellectually to ancient and medieval history and literature. Both "Piedras y Chile" and "Milonga del puñal" evoke the knife and hint at this tie; "Los dones" invokes the crimes of the sword. The remaining two poems are explicitly Germanic and medieval: "Un lobo" speaks to the failing paganism of Norse mythology in England, figured as the "wolf" of the title. The wolf will live on in the dreams of an old man in America, presumably Borges, so that the "iron of death" (another sword) which has been forged will kill the Anglo-Saxon wolf. Finally "Midgarthormr" describes the Midgard serpent of Norse legend, and Naglfar, the ship that will appear at Ragnarok. The apocalyptic images offered in the poem reflect back upon each other, until *Hacia el alba lo vi en la pesadilla* "Toward dawn I saw it all in nightmare." For

Borges, his thinking about Norse and Anglo-Saxon legends and texts is personal and present, part of the fundamental fabric of his life.

Elsewhere in *Atlas*, Borges discusses gods, totems, mythologies, symbols, and ideas. Many sections of the book are tied to places that Borges and Kodama visited in their last years, and links are frequently made to early historical situations. Thus for Istanbul, he mentions the well-known fact that the Emperors of Byzantium had Scandinavians, generally called Vikings, as their personal guard in the tenth and eleventh centuries. These men were renowned in the Middle Ages. In the same section, the opposition between Christianity and Islam, the fanatical hatred each religion has for the other, also appears. A round column found inside the hotel room in Reykjavik invokes the labyrinth of Crete, the labyrinth of Borges' own frequent imagination, and especially—a somewhat new reference—the labyrinth as imagined by Dante. In “Ars Magna,” from the corner of Raymundo Lulio Street in Mallorca (better written in Castilian Spanish as Raymund Llull), Borges discusses the cult of scripture in the thirteenth century, ties it together to Llull's theology, and then moves to brief and allusive references or links to Jonathan Swift, Francis Bacon, and Fritz Mauthner. The links are rich and resonant, and they suggest that when Borges thinks through the philosophy and theology of the Middle Ages, his recent connections are to English thinkers. The text as a whole is richly resonant, meditative, and philosophical. Death is a major theme; at the end it discusses “La Recoleta Cemetery in Buenos Aires”; in a highly anaphoric and rhetorically sophisticated sequence of sentences, Borges lists those inhabiting the cemetery from famous South American figures to his own ancestors including his grandfather, father, and mother. He states that his hair and nails will lie in this cemetery, and will continue growing (another reference to medieval legends) after his body becomes dust. The text links together many of Borges' lifelong issues and concerns, but it does so with greater precision than previously, and with even a broader range of reference than was typical of its author.

There was a new precision and rigor in Borges' medievalism at the end of his life, albeit one that was closely tied in to his previous work. This makes it a bit more difficult to identify the more accurate medievalism of his last days. Perhaps it should simply be noted that at the end of his life he was translating, not adapting or paraphrasing, Old English into surprisingly elegant modern Spanish. He also prepared a solid piece of work rendering the Old Norse *Gylfaginning*. His references to northern

texts of the early Middle Ages were more precise and focused. His life-long interest in Dante was now published as a close analysis of different features of the *Divine Comedy* and its antecedents—features, such as the dream-vision, about which he could make enlightened new comments concerning the structure and register of the work. His previous love and passion for the material was tempered in these final days by a newfound clarity of reference and exposition.

Borges' medievalism in late middle age

Perhaps the most romanticized medievalism of Borges' life, paradoxically, was that in his late fifties and sixties. In this period, and later in interviews and discussions, Borges constructed a medievalizing persona for himself, framing his professorship in Buenos Aires from 1956, and his post as director of the Bibliotheca Nacional from 1955, as being about the instruction of Old English and the reading of Old Norse. That medievalizing persona is remarkably enthusiastic, wholly engaged, utterly delighted by the sounds of these languages, and encouraging students to look words up in dictionaries, to shout phrases from their work in the streets of Buenos Aires, and generally to cultivate an uncritical enjoyment of the material. There is a great deal to be said for this approach to Old English and Old Norse. Some of the students in his classes, which perhaps are better described as reading groups, probably reached some serious scholarly knowledge in the field. Given my argument above, it seems likely that María Kodama, who appears to have joined these classes in 1969, was a serious student of both Old English and Old Norse. Her involvement in the projects he accomplished in the field in the late 1970s and the 1980s suggests, to me at least, that she really learned Old English at the least, and achieved a creditable understanding of Old Norse. Thus, where Borges himself was more an enthusiast, a philologist of English who adored tracing words and a poet who enjoyed contemplating modes of being of which he approved and delighted in the sonorities of early Germanic languages—Kodama was a true scholar, moving his work in the direction of much sounder and more sophisticated conclusions. Without that daily influence, as a lover of the German medieval, Borges depended more on his phenomenal memory, on his recollection of Old English poetry dating back decades. He knew this poetry in his soul, and enjoyed its sounds on his lips. His thinking about his own period, and

especially his thinking about nineteenth-century life in Argentina, owed a great deal to his analysis of heroism and courage in Old Norse sagas and especially *Beowulf*. The laconic *gaucho*, the slightly shady man of the *barrios* who was quick to anger in defence of his own honor or that of his family, the criminal who nonetheless behaves with courage and a sense of fair play: these figures in Borges' essays and short stories come from his own history and from his sense of an English code dating back more than a millennium.

For example, the central story of *The Aleph* is "The Aleph," a pleasingly circular tale.⁷ The first hinge of the tale is a reference to Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*, a massive catalogue, in alexandrines as Borges says, on which Drayton began working in 1598. It was published in the early seventeenth century, but its antecedents are purely medieval. The poem describes the topography of England and of Wales (Scotland was planned but never executed), and in addition to the poetic descriptions there were also maps and commentary materials. The text attempted a medievalizing and historicizing description of the land in connection with its medieval occupants. In Borges' short story, one of the central characters is making the same attempt at a catalogue poem, in his case describing the entire world. The project is absurd and fantastic, but its origins are in medieval encyclopedias and catalogues, in an attempt to make sense of the world by describing every inch of it. The second hinge of the tale is the Aleph itself, a kabbalistic tiny entity which contains in itself all of creation. The notion recalls Judaic theology, but also the idea of the *summa*, the sum of all knowledge, such as the one Thomas Aquinas attempted for Christian theology, and Isidore of Seville for etymology. Attempting to circumscribe and organize all knowledge was, as Borges well knew, a medieval focus. Finally, and most obviously, the architecture of the story is wholly Dantean. The protagonist, clearly an avatar of Borges himself, adores the sister of the poet Carlos Argentino Daneri (an Argentinian split of Dante), whose name is Beatriz Viterbo. Viterbo, one of the Papal States, has thermal springs described by Dante in the *Inferno*, and Beatriz is of course the young woman who dies, as Beatriz Viterbo dies at the beginning of "The Aleph," only to provide the poet with a focus for his love over many years, and a muse for his poetry. "The Aleph" invokes many modern and postmodern issues with its inward-turning intellectual construction of the universe, calls up Edgar Allan Poe with the cordial dislike leading into hatred that exists between the poet Daneri, brother of Beatriz, and the protagonist which

has the protagonist wondering, in the first person, why he has allowed himself to be locked away in a basement lying on the floor staring at a stair. But, the short story also has a kind of fundamentally medieval idea and structure, from the search for the divine and the ineffable, focused through the protagonist's desire to perceive and comprehend his Beatriz, and from the notion of comprehensive explanation and understanding, which was something only pursued in the Middle Ages. In the modern era, as Borges points out, the Aleph is false, leading from A to the Z's who people the story as well.

Also central to Borges' approach to Old English and Old Norse at this point in his life is his incipient blindness. He speaks of this frequently in interviews of all kinds, commenting particularly on how the language sounded and how its harshness and sheer lack of sentimentality made it very fine poetry. Rarely do his interviewers respond on this point. Thus, for example, in one of the many interviews with the poet and translator Willis Barnstone, Borges points out, very early in the interview:

When I lost my eyesight for reading purposes, I said: This should not be the end. "I will not abound"—as one of the writers I should have mentioned said—"In loud self-pity." No, this should prove the beginning of a new experience. And then I thought: I will explore the language my forefathers spoke. They may have spoken it in Mercia, in Northumbria, now called Northumberland. I will go back to Old English. And so, with a small group, among whom was María Kodama, we began the study of Old English. I know many pieces by heart. Very fine poetry. Not a sentimental line in it. A speech for warriors, for priests, for sailors also, and you find that, some seven centuries after Christ, the English were already looking at the sea.

Borges goes on to quote from *Beowulf* line 42, and to link its imagery of traveling far to his own life of movement in America. He then turns to his learning of Icelandic and then more generally to his consideration of Germanic mythology. He speaks freely and persuasively and at some length.⁸ The blindness for Borges, as has been noted throughout this monograph, was tightly tied to his knowledge of Old English and Old Norse. Where the blindness made him helpless and dependent on others for his mobility and for help with looking things up, the Old English and Old Norse empowered him. He knew as much as could be known about those languages and literatures, and had control of that material.

In a surprising number of these interviews, Borges also links his blindness and the rediscovery of Anglo-Saxon literature to the possibility of love. This is a very personal link, as love is not a common emotion in

Old English texts, nor in Old Norse. For example, in an interview with Roberto Alifano he states:

I've always been in love with some woman. I don't know, but I believe that love is a divine gift and, like beauty, love also pursues us everywhere. I feel slightly embarrassed to refer to my personal life, but people expect confidences and I have no reason to deny them mine. Love led me to understand my blindness, taught me not to give up. And then my blindness led me to study the Anglo-Saxon language and that richer and more recent world: Scandinavian literature. Later I wrote *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (Ancient Germanic Literatures). I studied its periods and the sagas, and I wrote poems based on those themes; and, above all, I enjoyed myself.⁹

Borges makes a similar point in an essay entitled "Blindness" (in translation), at greater length, in which he argues that to the darkness of blindness he owes "the gift of Anglo-Saxon, my limited knowledge of Icelandic, the joy of so many lines of poetry, of so many poems..."¹⁰ His knowledge of Old English in his mature years is something closely linked to his blindness and to the possibility of love.

Youthful Fervor and Delight becoming Scholarly Medievalism

In his last years Borges pulled together some of the works he had published but not collected from earlier years. The material from 1933 to 1934 which was published after his death under the aegis of María Kodama demonstrates just how prolific he was at this point, and how engaged with the medieval—but a highly mediated medieval.¹¹ This material demonstrates, for example, that over a two-month period in the fall of 1933, Borges publishes discussions of what he calls two ancient Germanic myths, the dragon and the witch. He also publishes an analysis of the thirteenth-century origins of the Inquisition as combating the Albigenian Crusade and its later developments in Spain; and discussions of two fantastically medieval beings, the gnome and the elf. At the same time, on September 23, 1933, he published what could be described as an historico-fantastical short story: "Renacen en el siglo XV Adán y Eva" (Adam and Eve are born again in the fifteenth century).¹² This is the year after his study of kennings had been published as a booklet, and two years before the collection in which the idea of the kenning and metaphor is central (*Historia de la eternidad*). Borges is something of an enthusiast of the Middle Ages in these

works, aware of both the serious study of the period and of the peripheral materials that are less scholarly but more fun: gnomes, elves, dragons, and so forth. His attitude is clear in his autobiographical essay concerning his study of "the simple Saxon kennings and overelaborate Norse ones."¹³ He refers to these metaphors as a "quaint notion," ties them into his family ancestry as being English on his grandmother's side, and turns to his decision to explore Old English with his students. The sequence is relatively enlightening, as it moves from a kind of medievalist assessment based on his own impressions as a poet, by way of a fairly common impulse toward medievalism (family ancestry and the search for one's roots) into a more formal study of the material. The sequence appears to be a tight one, but in fact the last element is nearly 20 years removed from the first.

Borges' turn to an enthusiastic but somewhat more rigorous approach to Germanic medieval texts took place in the late 1940s or at 1950. The evidence, as adduced earlier, includes his first booklength study in the field, the *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, published with Delia Ingenieros in 1951. It also includes several pieces not generally available until the publication ten years ago of the *Textos Recobrados* (Recovered Texts). For example, in 1938 he translates G.K. Chesterton's poem "Lepanto" into Spanish, a thoroughly medievalizing poem on the cusp of being epic, in which Don John of Austria (Don Juan de Austria, for Borges) goes to war in what Chesterton calls the last Crusade called by the Pope, and returns home triumphant.¹⁴

Similarly, Borges reviews Hilda Roderick Ellis' book *The Road to Hell* in 1946, focusing largely on her analysis of Scandinavian eschatology. Borges points out the importance of the concept of hell, the inferno, dating back to the *Odyssey*, and amplifies the argument of Ellis. He acknowledges her correct argument that Valhalla is genuinely hardly present in Old Norse texts, that this paradise of annihilation and chaos hardly appears in Germanic mythology. He seems rather unhappy about the point.¹⁵

The transition to the more scholarly but still somewhat romantic Borges appears to take place around 1950, as in sequence four pieces that surround the *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* volume appear. The first appears in 1951 and surveys the literary history of Portugal, focusing principally on the medieval era and some generalizations about the characteristics of Portuguese literature.¹⁶ Borges uses the overlap to Spain as he mentions Alfonso X el Sabio (the Wise) in order to introduce his grandson, the king of Portugal who was also a poet, and to offer two *cantigas* in the original and in his own translation. He spends an equally

extended amount of time on Luis Vaz de Camoens and his *Lusiads*, an appropriately epic and historical text about the exploits of the Portuguese. The next three pieces in the volume all refer to northern Germanic materials, either explicitly with the title and content, or with an added story: they discuss Ulfilas, the bishop of the Goths; offer dialogues between ascetic individuals and kings, with several examples finishing with the famous anecdote about the death of Odin; and consider the apostasy of Coefi, the pagan priest in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* who famously rejects his previous religion on the grounds that it did not do enough for him though he had been a dedicated worshipper. A few pages later is a piece called "El Dios y el Rey" (God and the King), which uses Olaf Haraldsson of Norway as a way to consider various scholarly works on Northern mythology, including H.R. Ellis and Paul Herrmann, in order to bring together various historical moments in the sagas. Together, published between 1951 and 1954 in several Buenos Aires periodicals or newspapers, these pieces testify to Borges' growing willingness to engage with the scholarship in the field in order to advance his own arguments about religion and the supernatural.¹⁷ In other words, Borges remains interested in gods and the position of the individual in the world, and remains interested in kings and their doings, but his interest in these matters moves in the direction of reading and assimilating scholarship in the field, and taking a position himself.

Finally, four pieces from the final volume of the *Textos Recobrados* (Recovered Texts) offer the mature Borges, the one who expresses delight in the medieval tempered by reasoned knowledge. There remains a heavy admixture of his personal engagement, as for example in the first piece, "Mi primer encuentro con Dante" (My first meeting with Dante), the first of a series of conference presentations. Borges does not engage with Dante's work as he does with other medieval texts; he speaks of the quality of the translation, of the text with facing translation that he first read in his early 30s, and of how the *Divina Commedia* offers a whole world of interpretation and engagement, a world he has only just touched. The approach here is very much that of the genial outsider. He does suggest that the novels of Sir Walter Scott had put him off the Middle Ages, but that his engagement with this text, daily on the *tranvía*, the streetcar number 76, allowed him the opportunity to meet *la obra máxima de la literatura* (the greatest work of literature).¹⁸ Second is the translation of the dialogue of Solomon and Saturn which later inflected the second revision of the *Literaturas germánicas medievales* volume, in 1978, and appeared

more or less intact in the 1978 translations. The focus here is on the role of Adam, which interested Borges on an intellectual and philosophical level. As Borges notes in a footnote, his thinking about Adam in the Middle Ages comes from Longfellow, who annotated his published translation of Dante in 1867. Although it might appear that Borges was engaging in new thinking here, he was reworking medievalist ideas derived from his reading of Longfellow.¹⁹

The third piece in this collection reflecting the continuing professionalization of Borges' life as a scholar is "El Concepto de una academia y los celtas" (The Notion of an Academy, and the Celts), a talk he gave when he was named a member of the Academia Argentina de Letras (Argentine Academy of Letters) in 1955. His argument is at the same time highly idiosyncratic, shockingly simplistic, and highly elevated, beginning with the rigorous intellectual and literary structure in France, with its academy of letters and its detailed dictionaries and its highly organized literature. Borges then argues that France, like many other European nations, is Celtic in origin, having been set aside by Rome and by German tribes before the Middle Ages. Borges then summarizes the various conversions of the Celts to Christianity, in Iceland, in Ireland, and the way in which their mythology and legendary history played into the literature and culture they developed. He argues for a poetic impulse deriving from this rigor and focus, citing both Matthew Arnold and the philologist Kuno Meyer. Passing by Ruben Darío's poetry in comparison with the medieval Celtic poet Taliesin, Borges arrives at the story of Conn, king of Ireland, and tells the bifurcated story of his life by comparison with the bifurcated story of Abraham in the Bible. For Celts, travel is fundamental, and nature is alive and quite possibly threatening, which requires a communal organization of humans to defend and organize themselves. They like organization. Borges concludes that Celts like Academies, but individualists such as those in England would not. The argument is rather breathtaking: it has some academic roots and branches, but the tree itself could be described as rather fanciful. In short, it serves as a nice analogue for Borges' medievalism in this period.²⁰

Finally, and in some respects most importantly, the volume contains the prologue for what was a separately published booklet, available in Buenos Aires in 1966, called *Seis poemas escandinavos* (Six Scandinavian—or, better, Viking—Poems).²¹ The six poems have all been separately published; they include the poem referred to earlier as "A una espada en York" (To a sword in York), and the sonnet Borges wrote

about Snorri, his favorite conflicted Norse writer. However, that Borges would publish a set of Scandinavian poems as a separate set, a coherent set, is very intriguing. The prologue speaks of the things that might have engendered his love of medieval Scandinavia (really, he means Vikings): his heritage, a memorable engraving he saw in a book, his delight in the sonority of Norse and Old English words, the symbols demarcated by the runes. He suggests that contemporary writers have forgotten the Middle Ages, but it is a requirement for the human soul. He notes that his poem “Hengist Cyning,” in modern terms “Hengist the King,” is Scandinavian in its background since, according to Bede, Hengist forged a kingdom for himself, leaving Denmark behind. Finally, Borges cites Jaimes Freyre as a Hispanic speaker who had, before Borges, discovered the Germanic medieval. Borges is not alone, he suggests, in this delight.

* * *

The publication of Borges’ entire *œuvre*, in various issues of his *Obras completas* (Complete Works), offers modern scholars a variety of new approaches to the writer. His deep interest in detective novels reflects his enjoyment of puzzles and *tromp l’œil* effects, and offers a new lens on his labyrinths and twisting, inturning tales. His delight in movies and in a broad range of British and American novels, to judge from the massive numbers of reviews he published, demonstrates that he was perhaps more current than some scholars adduce. It has long been known that upon the family’s return to Argentina, Jorge Luis was in the forefront of the literary scene of Buenos Aires, bringing to Argentina the ultraism which was the hermeneutic center of *madrileño* culture of the years during and just after the First World War. He also brought a continental interest in a broad range of cultural pursuits and ideas, and the many literary periodicals for which Borges wrote reviews and short notices and articles and short stories benefited massively from his engagement. All this was in pursuit of his poetry, something else which has not always been recognized as being at the core of Borges’ soul. To some extent, then, it could be argued that the short stories, famous thought-pieces that they are, really work out ideas that Borges was working on for very short commentaries or poems.

The short stories or *fabulae* allowed Borges to open an idea or approach, and to explore it from several points of view, several vantages, in order to see how it could function and how it could be subverted or played with or deconstructed. Through all of this production, however, Borges

remained a medievalist. Although he wrote about the medieval works of Portugal, and much more briefly about the medieval literature of Spain and France, his medievalism was entirely northern in its focus. He found fascinating the brief but powerful accomplishments of Bishop Ulfilas, the translator of the Bible into Gothic, though little has survived of that remarkable work. He delighted in the surviving Old English poems, and especially in the difficulties of decoding them, the need to read one in the light of another in order to find meaning. *Beowulf* is about a hero, but one inflected by the laments and uncertainties of the elegies, and by the trickiness and complexity of the riddles and their overlapping lexicons. The Old Norse sagas and the poetic *Edda*, in large part produced by the greatly flawed but magnificent figure of Snorri Sturluson, intrigued Borges as much for their hugely flawed protagonists, big in image and big in error, as for their sophisticated vocabulary and highly stylized action sequences. Borges even approaches Dante, the great mystic poet who served as forerunner to Borges' own mystic turns, by way of Bede's dream-visions, prophetic accounts of visions of hell and heaven.

I argued earlier for a nineteenth-century lens hovering over Borges' medievalism, giving his access to the Middle Ages the rosy glow of nineteenth-century approaches to indomitable heroism, remarkable feats of courage, and romanticized love. At this point, however, it seems appropriate to quote Michel Zink, the great French medievalist. (Borges was discovered as a major author when he won the Prix Formentor jointly with Samuel Beckett in 1961. His works were first translated into French, and only later into English; he also wrote some pieces in French in the early part of his career. It seems, then, somehow appropriate to quote a French scholar of medievalism with respect to Borges.) Zink argues concerning the impulse toward medievalism that in each generation some works have signs that associate them with the past.²² These signs, he proposes, are signs of fragmentation; they produce "a dual effect, of quotation and of relic."²³ In his poetry Borges often uses a relic as his focus: see his "Poem Written in a Copy of *Beowulf*," or the poem he wrote about a sword shown to him in York Minster in the north of England. He delights in contemplating issues of memory, of the loss of the past, of the contemplation of time and eternity because both require an understanding of the flawed uncertainties of former times. Zink concludes that:

It is oblivion that designates the past. These heady and distant songs must be lacunary, or their disjointedness must give the impression of a vestige, so that we may suppose them half effaced by time . . . poetry has brought itself

into relief by profiling in the distance the half-effaced silhouette of another poetry, whose antiquity and simplicity counterbalance and confirm both its sophistication and its novelty. To do that, it takes care to arrange the trompe l'œil perspective on the past through the play of ruptures and dissonances.²⁴

Borges would have agreed whole-heartedly. A man both enamored of and repelled by the kenning, a poet delighting in a half-perceived past, a scholar fiercely remembering his Old English and Old Norse because his own perception—his eyes—did not function, and a fabulist focusing his view of the world through “the play of ruptures and dissonances”: yes, he would have agreed with Zink. Oblivion marks the past and we cannot reach it. Nonetheless, Borges might well have argued near the end of his own life, we can live it. In many ways, he certainly did.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, the many review pieces (which reveal a Borges highly knowledgeable about science fiction, detective novels, and modern British and American literature) in Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas 1975–1988*. (Barcelona: Emecé, 1996); see especially “Santa Juana de Arco” (Saint Joan of Arc), originally published November 27, 1936, pp. 226–227; the review of Frank Ernest Hill, *The Canterbury Tales, A New Rendering* from February 5, 1937, pp. 252–253; two discussions of Lord Dunsany, the first April 30, 1937, p. 283, and the second September 2, 1938, p. 386; and the review of H.G. Wells, *Brynhild* on 29 October 1937, p. 327.
- 2 Snorri Sturluson, “Saga de Egil Skallagrimsson,” in *Obras completas 1975–1988*, p. 529. The prologues had been published as a set in 1985, and some earlier in 1975 as well. But that this is a late work seems indubitable.
- 3 See Jorge Luis Borges, with collaboration of María Kodama, *Atlas* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 1984), and *Atlas*, Jorge Luis Borges, in collaboration with María Kodama, trans. and annotated by Anthony Kerrigan (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1985).
- 4 The role of Borges’ collaborators is much discussed. Emir Rodríguez Monegal divides them into two groups: the amanuenses who chased down references and occasionally finished up a Borgesian sentence, sometimes in ways that would be confusing; and the genuine partners such as Adolfo Bioy de Casares. See “Los Colaboradores,” in *Borges por el Mismo* (Borges, on his own) (Caracas, Venezuela: Monte Avila Editores, 1980), pp. 223–228.
- 5 See Martin S. Stabb, *Borges Revisited* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 99.
- 6 See Stabb, *Borges Revisited*, p. 100.

- 7 "The Aleph" in Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and other Stories 1933–1969*. Ed. and trans. by Norman Thomas di Giovanni and Jorge Luis Borges (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970), pp. 15–30.
- 8 See *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*. Ed. Willis Barnstone (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 3. The same thing occurs at pp. 106–107, when Borges refers to his loss of sight in 1955, his decision to work with students to learn Old English, various words and a sentence that they loved. He finishes with the statement that "You begin with Old English, and, if you're lucky, you achieve Old Norse." Barnstone responds with questions on fame. Only in chapter 10, when Borges takes questions from the audience, does one member ask him to speak more about Old English—and he does, at some length (pp. 150–151).
- 9 *Twenty-Four Conversations with Borges, Including a Selection of Poems: Interviews by Roberto Alifano 1981–1983* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), pp. 14–15. Note that Alifano immediately asks a question about blindness, and also that Borges refers to the book by its earlier title, though he gets the date wrong since the work was published in 1951.
- 10 10. See Jorge Luis Borges, *The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise*. Trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and Eliot Weinberger (London: Penguin, 2010). "Blindness" is translated by Weinberger, pp. 111–126, ending the book; the section on Borges and Old English is pp. 116–119, quotation is p. 118. Elsewhere in the volume appears Borges' paper on "The Innocence of Layamon," pp. 82–87.
- 11 See Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges: Obras, Reseñas y Traducciones Inéditas. Colaboraciones de Jorge Luis Borges en la Revista Multicolor de los Sábados del diario Crítica, 1933–1934*. Compiled by Irma Zangara (Buenos Aires: Editorial Atlántica, 1995), pp. 39–45.
- 12 Borges, *Borges: Obras, Reseñas*, pp. 125–132.
- 13 Borges, "Autobiographical Essay," in *The Aleph*, p. 251.
- 14 See Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos Recobrados 1931–1955* (Barcelona: Emecé Editores, 2002), pp. 170–179. Originally published in *Sol y Luna* 1 (1938).
- 15 Review, Hilda Roderick Ellis, *The Road to Hell*, in *Textos Recobrados 1931–1955*, pp. 236–237.
- 16 "Portugal," *Textos Recobrados 1931–1955*, pp. 277–297.
- 17 See "El Destino de Ulfilas" (The Fate of Ulfilas), pp. 298–301 (first published 1953); "Diálogos del asceta y del rey" (Dialogues between an ascetic and a king), pp. 302–306, from 1953; "La apostasía de Coifi" (The Apostasy of Coefi), pp. 307–311, from 1953; and "El Dios y el Rey" (The God and the King), pp. 326–331, from 1954, all in *Textos Recobrados 1931–1955*.
- 18 "Mi primer encuentro con Dante," in Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos Recobrados 1955–1986* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 2003), pp. 71–74. The quotation is from p. 73. The speech had been in 1958, and was published in 1961.

- 19 “Un Diálogo anglosajón del siglo XI” (An Anglo-Saxon Dialogue of the Eleventh Century) in *Textos Recobrados 1955–1986*, pp. 82–84. The next piece, not discussed here, is entitled “Inglaterra” (England) and discusses the literature of England from *The Seafarer* to Yeats, and the English personality, especially strong in its opposition to dictatorship of all kinds (pp. 85–86).
- 20 “El Concepto de una academia y los Celtas” (The Notion of an Academy and the Celts), in *Textos Recobrados 1955–1986*, pp. 89–97.
- 21 “Seis Poemas Escandinavos [Prólogo]” (Six Viking Poems [Prologue]), in *Textos Recobrados 1955–1986*, pp. 110–111. The booklet was published in 1966.
- 22 See Michel Zink, *The Enchantment of the Middle Ages*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 23.
- 23 Zink, *The Enchantment of the Middle Ages*, p. 23.
- 24 Zink, pp. 131–132.

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